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Invisibly at risk: low-income students in a middle and upper-class world

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Invisibly at risk:

Low-income students in a middle and upper-class world

Women's studies programs, multicultural centers, and organizations to support gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender students are campus fixtures. Few now question diversity's contribution to the education of all students. Jennifer Duffy suggests that it's time to acknowledge, support, and celebrate one more, mostly hidden, form of diversity – social class.

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Brief Bio: Jennifer O. Duffy is an assistant professor of higher education at Suffolk University in Boston. She researches social class and gender equity in higher education.

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As a working-class student at Amherst College, the difference between my background and that of my peers had remained invisible—neither a cause for concern nor a source of stigmas and stereotypes—until, during my first year, my father arrived at my room in the residence hall to pick me up for fall break. In his excitement to see me, he had driven directly from work and arrived still dressed in his firefighter uniform. His presence quite honestly shocked my floormate Paul who could barely utter a hello to my dad upon being introduced. I do not believe Paul was trying to be abrasively rude, but his utter disbelief that a daughter of a firefighter attended Amherst inhibited his conversational skills. When I returned from my weekend visit, it was obvious that Paul wanted to discuss the awkward interaction with me. But as the son of a Wall-Street lawyer and the graduate of an exclusive prep-school, Paul did not know how to approach the subject with me. So instead, he ended up asking, “So your dad is... a firefighter – so do you get like money from the government then to come here?”

Obviously, Paul was curious not only about how I could afford to attend this elite college, but probably was genuinely interested in how my life had differed from his. It was apparent that he did not understand how to initiate a discussion on social class, and I did not have the confidence and pride in my background to generate anything but “Yes, I do get financial assistance.” A learning opportunity for both of us was missed. Years later, I still regret this interaction because I believe Paul and I had the potential to engage in a meaningful conversation about how social class had influenced our backgrounds.

This could have laid the groundwork for a friendship based on mutual understanding and appreciation of difference. We were not alone in our inability to discuss social class. Neither students nor educators on our campus held such conversations. The only exposure my classmates had to “lower-income” people was a tutoring program for school children in surrounding towns. Paul remained a little uncomfortable around me for the rest of our undergraduate years, and my avoidance of him was cloaked in embarrassment that he had learned my little secret: that I was different from him and other students. At the time, I was not fully aware that my feelings of difference could be attributed to my class background. I internalized feelings of shame and inadequacy instead of taking pride in the upward mobility that had brought me to this elite liberal arts college.

Looking back, my undergraduate experience could have been more fulfilling if I had had the knowledge, vocabulary, and confidence to discuss social class diversity with my classmates both in and out of the classroom. I strongly believe that my peers could have benefited from learning about my background and that all students are not middle and upper class. A driving force behind my professional work now is to educate campus administrators and students on the importance of bringing social class diversity to the foreground. As faculty, staff, and administrators become better educated about the value of the working-class, they can lift the veil of misunderstanding about social class and create opportunities to discuss their own backgrounds and personal prejudices with students both in and out of the classroom. Ultimately, educators and students can work together to abolish the discriminatory views that portray lower-income individuals as lazy and as inherently less capable than those from higher-income families.

Understanding social class diversity enhances the learning of all students and better prepares them for their lives as responsible citizens. Research suggests that the more exposure students have to all types of diversity as undergraduates, the more likely they are to gain an appreciation for difference, be engaged community members who advocate for social justice, and develop interpersonal skills necessary to work with co-workers from diverse backgrounds (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Because our nation's competitiveness increasingly depends on the quality of those who graduate from college, educators have an increasing responsibility to help students succeed. This type of education requires a diverse student population. William Bowen and Derek Bok in their 1998 book, *The Shape of the River*, assert that the most powerful environments for learning are those that include students from a wide range of backgrounds. Analysis of data presented by the authors indicates that “direct association with dissimilar individuals is essential to learning” (p. 218).

The Widening Gaps in Educational Opportunities

Although there is widespread agreement at the institutional and national level that diversity is important to learning, a wide representation of economic diversity on American campuses is not a reality. Over the past fifty years, the U.S. has made efforts to realize economic equity in higher education by increasing financial aid opportunities, introducing need-based aid in many states, and increasing federal aid through the Higher Education Act of 1965 and that act's 1972 amendments. Despite these efforts, access to and graduation from America's institutions among students from lower socio-economic backgrounds lags far behind that of their higher-income peers. The degree of inequality

in access to American higher education has never been greater than it is today, and this increasing disparity is moving the American dream farther away from more students.

Alexander Astin and Leticia Oseguera explain in a recent article in the *Review of Higher Education* that the economic impact of going to college in general, and going to a more selective college in particular, has never been greater, and some research suggests that this impact may be greatest for the poorest students.

At the 2004 American Council on Education's annual meeting, former Harvard University President Lawrence Summers reported that the disparity between the percentages of upper- and lower-income students attending college is greater than it has ever been. Lawrence Gladieux (2004) notes that, over the past few years, a student from the highest income quartile and the lowest aptitude quartile is as likely to be enrolled in college as a student from the lowest income quartile and the highest aptitude quartile. Gladieux reports that by the time they are 24 years old, nine in ten high school graduates from families earning more than \$80,000 attend college, compared with only six in ten students from families earning less than \$33,000.

In *America's Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education*, Richard Kahlenberg suggests that, given demographic shifts, access to education beyond high school is more important than ever. One in five American newborn is the child of a foreign-born parent and the children of immigrants are twice as likely as their peers to be poor. Policymakers and educators must begin to advocate for economic equality and work to create opportunities for financial, academic, and social support for all students.

Social Class Diversity Actions and Obstacles

Access

In October 2006, The College Board reported that total funding for Pell Grants declined from \$13.6 billion in 2004-2005 to \$12.7 billion in 2005-2006, the first decrease in six years. The average Pell Grant per recipient dropped from \$2,474 to \$2,354, bringing attention to the nation's growing crisis in college access and affordability. The average student now graduates with \$17,500 in student loan debt and the National Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance estimates that up to 2.4 million qualified students will fail to obtain bachelor's degrees over the next decade because of financial barriers.

In keeping with the pattern of recent years, tuition averages are up at a rate that exceeds the rate of inflation, with four-year institutions imposing larger increases than community colleges. The average increase for community colleges was 4.1 percent for 2006-7, while the average for four-year public institutions was 6.3 percent and 5.9 percent for private four-year institutions. In 2006, the Secretary of Education's *Commission on the Future of Higher Education* proposed a substantial increase in federal spending on need-based aid. The federal Pell Grant program would move coverage of in-state tuition over five years from 44 to 77 percent. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings responded by making a non-specific call for an increase in need-based grant aid.

In the face of an unresolved fiscal situation at the federal level, leading higher education institutions have made important moves to improve access and fiscal support for working-class and first-generation students. In September 2006, Harvard University

announced a trial plan to eliminate its early admissions action program in an effort to expand financial aid and increase openness in admissions. Harvard's early admissions action program is a nonbinding, early notification program. A student admitted early action has until May 1, as do all admitted students, to accept his or her spot in the entering class. After students receive notification from Harvard's Early Action program (around December 15), they are free to apply to any institution under any plan; however they are not permitted to apply to early action programs at other institutions. Harvard's early action program has favored students from affluent backgrounds who can apply without regard to the status of federal financial aid applications. In contrast, lower-income students unaware of the details of the early admissions action program have failed to take advantage of this opportunity to apply early in the belief that they relinquish the opportunity to compare financial aid packages offered by different schools.

The Harvard initiative is part of a 2004 announcement designed to encourage talented students from families of low and moderate incomes to attend the institution. Parents of families with incomes of less than \$40,000 are no longer expected to contribute to tuition costs and the university has reduced the contributions it expects from families with incomes between \$40,000 and \$60,000. The university has intensified its efforts to reach out to talented students who might not consider Harvard an option and has reemphasized its policy of identifying applicants who have remarkable accomplishments, regardless of their financial resources.

In 2005, under the leadership of President Anthony W. Marx, Amherst College publicly renewed its commitment to its original mission to seek out talented students,

regardless of their means to pay. Since he became president in 2003, Marx has set in motion an affirmative action initiative based on increasing access for lower-income students. As a first-generation college student, the president gained support from trustees by asking them to imagine that Amherst could be free to everyone, then posed the question...“Now which students would you take?”

Some faculty and students have voiced concerns that his crusade will jeopardize Amherst’s reputation as a top quality institution. To ameliorate these concerns, Marx proposed expanding each entering class and reserving seats for low-income students. To fund this effort, Marx and the trustees embarked on the largest fund-raising campaign in the college’s history. To further minimize criticism, Marx enlisted the support of members of the entire campus community to find top-notch low-income applicants. The admissions office began visiting more low-income high schools, alumni in the teaching professions were asked by Marx to recommend talented low-income students, and the president contracted with *QuestBridge*, a Palo Alto, California nonprofit that enlists the help of 8,000 high school teachers in identifying talented low-income students to apply to elite colleges. As a combined result of these efforts, the college saw the portion of the 2006 entering class from the bottom third of incomes grow from 15 to 20 percent.

Like Amherst, Princeton has also recently made efforts to shift the attention of American higher education and the general public to the issue of access for lower-income students. In 2001, Princeton eliminated loans for all students who qualify for aid, thereby expanding a program instituted three years earlier that replaced loans with grants for low-income students. The groundbreaking "no loan" program is part of a series of

enhancements to Princeton's aid program launched in 1998 that includes adjusting formulas for determining need. These adjustments have reduced the amount that students and families are expected to contribute.

Princeton's 2005 entering class included a record number of economically diverse students, with 52 percent being financial aid recipients from low-income families. Of the 675 first-year students on financial aid, 196 were from low-income households (defined as families earning less than \$50,900 per year), up from 161 the previous year. Dean of the College Nancy Malkiel said, "As the data make plain, we have been tremendously successful in attaining our goal of making Princeton affordable for any student regardless of family financial circumstances...The changes in financial aid policy have had a dramatic effect on the economic diversity of the undergraduate student body." While the Ivy League schools mentioned here are among a handful of private institutions that can afford to admit first-year students without regard to ability to pay, their actions serve as models for other institutions.

Some highly selective public institutions including the University of Virginia, the University of Maryland at College Park, and the University of Michigan have also enacted ambitious and laudable programs to increase the number of low-income students enrolled. The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill recently established The Carolina Covenant, a program that eliminates loans from the financial aid packages of students from families with incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. The program also guarantees that students who work up to 12 hours on the work-study program will be paid enough grant money to cover the cost of their educations. In

addition, the college has enhanced recruitment efforts targeted at working-class and first-generation college students.

In 2006, Miami University established the Miami Access Initiative to increase college access for all academically qualified Ohio residents, regardless of their family's income. Students are eligible if they qualify for federal financial aid and come from families with an Adjusted Gross Income at or less than \$35,000. The Initiative guarantees that all eligible students receive scholarship packages and/or grant funds that meet or exceed the cost of four year's worth of tuition and fees. Although the scholarship packages do not cover the cost of housing and books, these expenses can be paid with other funding sources and students who qualify for this program remain eligible for federally sponsored student loans, work-study, and other private loans.

Social and Academic Dimensions

Access and financial support do not necessarily lead to success for low-income students; such policies must be coupled with a range of other support systems aimed at ensuring that students enroll and graduate. Brian Fitzgerald and Jennifer Delaney in *Condition of Access* reveal that within five years of entering college nationwide, more than 40 percent of students from the top income quartile graduate with a bachelor's degree compared to 6 percent from the lowest income quartile. These low graduation rates for low-income students can be attributed to academic and social struggles unique to this population that act as barriers to their success.

The needs of low-income students may be overlooked because of the relative invisibility of this risk factor, as compared to others based on race, gender, or disability. Arthur Levine and Jana Nidiffer note in their 1996 book *Beating the Odds* that students

from lower socio-economic groups can feel marginalized, especially as they make the transition to an upper-class college environment. This feeling of marginalization can negatively impact their academic and social experiences in this new environment.

According to an *About Campus* article written by Howard London, students from lower-income families report feeling alienated, lonely, academically unprepared, and socially inadequate. Recent studies additionally have shown that students from low-Socioeconomic Status (SES) backgrounds have lower educational and career aspirations, persistence rates, and educational attainment than their peers from high-SES backgrounds. In a recent study, MaryBeth Walpole found that low-SES students are less likely to participate in clubs and organizations, to network, and to pursue other academic routes to material success after graduation. Furthermore, working-class students--graduating with the same grades from the same institutions as more affluent students--are less likely to attend graduate school and ultimately earn lower incomes and hold less prestigious positions. Due to both linguistic and cultural barriers (barriers that seem to persist despite ability and hard work), access to the most coveted rewards of the academic power structure is ultimately denied to the majority of working-class students.

In her 2001 book, *First Generation College Students*, Sandra Rodriguez writes that upwardly mobile working-class students live in two culturally distinct and contradictory worlds: their family/home environments and their academic institutions. For example, a deeply held value of the working-class culture is group affiliation; yet the academy's highly individualized tasks of writing and reading are the antithesis of this value. Consequently, working-class students can experience a combination of guilt, shame, and anxiety in shedding their blue-collar identity and accepting their new middle-

class status as college students. Similarly, research has shown that success in higher education often requires working-class students to discard their cultural heritage and adopt new identities that alienate them from their former lives, friends, and families. As a former working-class student, Professor Diane Reay said the following about how social class operates at colleges and universities: “The double bind of higher education for working-class students is that assimilation constitutes betrayal while holding on to aspects of working-class identity marks out acceptability” (p. 445).

Institutional Programs and Models that Support Social Class Diversity

Educators are generally in agreement that social class advocacy is necessary. The question remains how to effectively improve the quality of undergraduate life for low-income students as well as educate the entire campus about issues related to social class. A combination of academic and co-curricular programs and collaborations between academic and student affairs educators most expediently answers this question.

A first step is sharing information across the campus community about programs established by Congress to help low-income Americans enter and graduate from college, and become fully functioning members of the country’s economic and social life. These programs, together referred to as TRIO, are funded under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and are designed to help students overcome class, social, and cultural barriers to success in college. While not all institutions qualify to offer TRIO programs (especially wealthier institutions), those that do can offer low-income students a variety of academic and social support services to ease the process into and through the undergraduate experience.

Many campuses also offer summer transition and bridge programs for first-generation and low-income college students during the period right before these students' first academic term. For example, Amherst invites incoming students from low-income backgrounds to a three-week summer science and math program. Harvard offers *The Crimson Summer Academy*, an intensive summer program for academically talented high school students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds living in the greater Boston area. Each student participates for three successive summers, beginning after ninth grade, and receives encouragement and preparation necessary to qualify for admission to a challenging four-year college or university.

Once students enroll, many who are the first in their families to attend college may need extra encouragement to develop skills for independent, lifelong learning. Working-class students may also need extra assistance in learning effective study strategies and developing analytical skills. As pivotal as academic success is to retention, students also need support in learning how to successfully balance campus activities with other responsibilities, including employment. Past research has identified several features of effective programs designed to increase low-income students' success rates (Borrego, 2004). Effective programs are comprehensive, involve the entire campus community, and include mentoring and study skills assistance. Staff members of these programs serve as student advocates to other campus departments and they plan and deliver campus-wide events that validate working-class backgrounds.

Although working-class students might initially be too intimidated to talk to faculty and student affairs professionals about classes, undergraduate life, and career

planning, they should receive frequent encouragement to do so. Students least likely to seek out advice from professors and administrators are typically among those who need mentoring the most. Educational research has repeatedly shown that when lower-income students find mentors who believe in their potential and guide them through the undergraduate years, these students' chances of success are significantly greater than they would be otherwise (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Rodriguez, 2001). Effective mentoring programs for first-generation and low-income students do not simply focus on student persistence in college. They aim to increase student awareness of the impact their decisions can have on opportunities for graduate school and careers. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may also need extra support in registering for and taking graduate or professional school entrance examinations and building career networks. Any member of the campus community, faculty, staff, and administrators, can serve in this mentoring role.

A model example of a multi-faceted support program for low-income students is Boston College's federally sponsored program Learning to Learn (LTL). This program uses a comprehensive approach to providing low-income students with the skills they need to succeed in college and beyond. Established at Boston College in 1979, the Learning to Learn program is now a national model and has been adopted by more than 100 colleges in the United States and abroad. LTL was designated an Exemplary Program by the U.S. Department of Education, which recognized it as the only college-level effort that demonstrated a significant impact on long-term improvements in student grade point averages and graduation rates for the targeted population. Repeated studies have indicated that 95 to 98 percent of students who participate in LTL at Boston College

eventually graduate from that institution (the graduation rate for students with similar backgrounds not participating in the LTL program is 83 percent).

Learning to Learn is successful because it takes a unified approach to assisting first-generation and low-income students. At Boston College, these services include, but are not limited to, academic assistance, individual and group counseling, financial aid advising, cultural enrichment programs, and a course on learning theory. LTL also acts as a liaison for students with other offices and departments at the college. Students report that they benefit from the services LTL offers to help them succeed in a challenging academic environment. Students also indicate that LTL staff members are caring, inviting, and personally invested in the success of each student. Dan Brown, director of LTL, notes that high priorities for the program are to welcome and support every student participant. The LTL environment prompts students to spend informal hours in the program's house, meeting and building relationships with other students, and volunteering as teaching assistants. As one former LTL student who became a teaching assistant explains, "LTL has benefited me in countless ways. In addition to learning valuable study skills, LTL has allowed me to build my leadership abilities through tutoring students."

LTL exemplifies Ernest Boyer's statement that educationally purposeful campuses are open and just environments where diversity is affirmed (Boyer, 1990). Suffolk University is another institution that has made efforts to create this type of environment and celebrate the diversity, including social class, of its students. A campus-wide forum on the crisis of access in higher education allowed students, staff, faculty,

and members of the Boston community to discuss issues related to diminishing higher education opportunities for some students. Such forums can unite campuses around an important societal issue and dispel the myth that lower-income students do not go to college because they are not capable of success.

In a move to create a welcoming environment for all students, Amherst President Marx has increased the number of campus-wide discussions held on important topics, including class difference. He invites small groups of students to meet with him for "fireside chats" and meets with low-income students to hear their ideas on integrating issues of social diversity into campus life. Convening off-campus retreats to allow students to discuss social class issues away from the Amherst environment was one idea generated through these group meetings. Meeting participants also recommended that the college pay expenses for families of low-income students wishing to attend events such as Parents' weekend. Their presence would increase the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds represented at these events.

Both public conversations and college classes in sociology, political science, economics, psychology and other disciplines can increase understanding of issues related to social class. Youngstown State University and SUNY at Stony Brook house working-class studies centers that offer students and the general public a place for rigorous, intellectual discussions on social class. Youngstown hosts campus and community discussions on working-class life and culture and its intersections with race, gender, and sexuality. It also conducts research on working-class issues and on integrating these issues into instruction. The Youngstown center's two-fold mission is to be intellectually rigorous and to be engaged in the broader community. It helps create awareness of the

working class, develops and delivers courses in working-class studies, organizes a biennial conference, publishes a newsletter, and sponsors an annual speaker series. It also houses a library and maintains a bibliography on working-class studies to support scholarly work in this field.

The Center for Study of Working Class Life at Stony Brook promotes multiple forms of scholarship, teaching, and activism related to working-class life nationally and internationally. By sponsoring a working-class studies association, the center provides opportunities for academics, artists, activists, workers, independent scholars, students, and others to share their work, make connections with colleagues and professional organizations, and learn about resources related to structural inequalities. The organization also maintains a Website and e-mail list, disseminates models of working-class studies that involve and serve the interests of working-class people, and provides interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary, and disciplinary approaches to studying and teaching about the lived experience of working-class people. The efforts at Youngstown and Stony Brook indicate that Class Studies are now joining Women's Studies, Asian and African Studies, and Gay and Lesbian Studies as partners in the process of educating the campus and community about diversity issues.

The Future and What's At Risk

American higher education takes pride in bringing together and educating students with myriad experiences and viewpoints and in upholding the ideals of merit, social justice, and inclusiveness. Under-representation of qualified students from lower-income backgrounds limits the country's talent pool and constrains its future civic,

economic, and political growth. America's lead on educational attainment is at risk.

Some institutions, as noted above, are showing others the way by opening their doors and offering powerful transformative educational experiences for all students, across social classes. The task for others is to follow their example.

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