

HUMBLE AND HOPEFUL:

# Welcoming First-Generation Poor and Working-Class Students to College

*Students who are the first in their family to enter higher education join a rarified and often mystifying culture of rules, rites, and rituals.*

*A first-generation working-class college student who became a faculty member offers his insights and recommendations after forty years in the academy.*

BY KENNETH OLDFIELD

**W**HILE SEXISM, RACISM, homophobia, and other prejudices offend most Americans, both inside and outside the academy, fewer people articulate the profound effects of social-class bias. For example, professors seldom detail the considerable advantages that the offspring of parents who hold college or university degrees possess. Admittedly, some faculty discuss social class in the abstract, but rarely do they describe how socioeconomic forces shape their own campus and their own life or depict the benefits that parents with college educations from the middle or top socioeconomic classes bequeath to their children.

Because of my humble background, I experienced my socioeconomic status (SES) as a lack of cultural capital as I headed off to college. Cultural capital is the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily. Cultural capital is what I did not have. My parents and grandparents never finished high school. They all worked blue-collar jobs ranging from truck driver to restaurant cook to janitor. I had mediocre college entrance examination scores and average high school grades. I still marvel at how little I understood about the higher-social-class sensibilities of university life when I started college.

It was only much later and through my own reading and personal conversations with other first-generation working class college students that I came to understand why high-SES values predominate at college. It is mostly a case of majority rule, given that college students and professors are disproportionately from high-SES backgrounds. In *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*, William Bowen, Martin Kurzweil, and Eugene Tobin report that poor and working-class students are significantly underrepresented at nineteen of the nation's most selective universities. Only 11 percent of students at these schools were from families in the lowest income quartile, whereas 50 percent were from families in the highest income quartile. Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose reported similar findings in their study of 146 of the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities. These researchers and others note the strong connection between socioeconomic origins and academic achievement. Pierre Bourdieu explains that even when low-SES students are qualified for admission to highly selective schools, they often lack the cultural capital necessary to apply.

In response to the noted underrepresentation of poor and working-class students at selective institutions, Bowen and his colleagues as well as Carnevale and Rose recommend that these institutions begin to recruit more applicants from disadvantaged origins who have promising entrance scores. Bowen and his colleagues suggest that once leading institutions start recruiting more applicants from among low-SES students, colleges and universities everywhere will follow suit. While I applaud these egalitarian recommendations, I also know firsthand that there is far more to expanding learning opportunities than simply enrolling a more socioeconomically diverse student body.

First-generation college students from poor and working-class backgrounds must understand that their new surroundings will require much more from them than just getting good marks. No matter what distance they have physically traveled to their campus, college requires a cultural journey to a very different land than the one they knew as youngsters. For first-generation poor and working-class college students, surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average.

To increase the odds that first-generation students with low-SES backgrounds will persist and prosper in

college, it is vital that their chosen schools offer them an adequate social support system throughout their stay. These students must be helped to understand that they are entering a foreign culture, a place that can be quite forbidding. The problem is not that they cannot do the work; rather, it is their estrangement in their new surroundings. At college, they will meet people from families with advantages they can hardly imagine, including overseas travel, large in-home libraries, subscriptions to news and cultural magazines, the latest computer technologies, horse stables, chandeliers in the dining room, luxury cars, fine clothing, and so on. This description applies not just to the nation's leading institutions but to many other schools, though perhaps to a slightly lesser degree.

Today, after spending nearly forty years in higher education, first as a student and then as a professor, I think more and more about how much easier college would have been had I known at the start what most of my privileged cohorts took for granted. Happily, direct experience is not the only teacher. Tales told by former poor and working-class first-generation college students can help today's newcomers survive and prosper in the academy. For one, these accounts can encourage other students and help them see that they are not the first to feel alone and intimidated in the land of higher education. Second, such stories can help poor and working-class first-generation college students recognize that they can surmount the challenges they face, especially if they avail themselves of services designed to smooth their path.

Personal narratives can also help faculty and administrators see why it is necessary to change the campus environment so that first-generation college students with humble economic backgrounds feel more at home there. Likewise, making the campus more inviting can enrich the lives of students and professors of more privileged origins. Democratizing higher education so that it represents a more complex reality and more diversity in terms of SES will help privileged groups gain a greater respect and appreciation for the values and survival skills their fellow travelers bring to campus. With proper nurturing, certain so-called disadvantages can be reinterpreted as differences rather than shortcomings. In sum, the ultimate goal should be reforming the campus culture so that it better reflects the lives of all who go there, irrespective of their socioeconomic background.

Finally, the comments in the following section are not meant as an end in themselves; rather, they are meant as a foundation. I will conclude the commentary by proposing four reforms that all colleges should enact: first, institutions need to ensure that their first-generation poor and working-class college students are being

---

**Kenneth Oldfield** is emeritus professor of public administration at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Marcia Baxter Magolda (aboutcampus@muohio.edu), and please copy her on notes to authors.

properly oriented to college life, and second, they need to change their campus environment so that all students gain a deeper appreciation for how SES and social-class origins affect the trajectory of all our lives.

## SIX LESSONS THAT I WISH I HAD KNOWN BEFORE GOING TO COLLEGE

**Lesson 1: I wish I had known the difference between a “doctor” and a “doctur.”** I had never heard of a Ph.D. until I encountered higher education. At West Liberty State College, my undergraduate school, most professors held master’s degrees, but few had Ph.D.’s. Two of my first-semester teachers introduced themselves as “doctor.” I was confused but too scared to ask for clarification. Later in that first week, as I was walking by various faculty offices, I noticed that some had “Dr.” on the door nameplate. Seeing some of these titles, I wondered why this college would hire physicians to teach subjects such as speech, German, and history. It made some sense that M.D.’s would teach the natural sciences, but not business or the humanities; why would someone with all that earning power take a relatively low-paying job? Perhaps they did the work on the side? That seemed unlikely. Even after learning the difference between a Ph.D. and an M.D., it was hard to see the former as real doctors, like those who order lab tests, prescribe medicines, do surgery, or pull teeth.

Later, as a Ph.D. student, I discovered another twist on the “real doctor” versus “not a real doctor” theme. I had become friends with several medical students, and they sometimes kidded me about not being a real doctor. I consulted a dictionary and learned that *doctor* comes from Latin and means “to teach.” After that, anytime my medical school friends ribbed me about not being a real doctor, I would explain this etymology and say, good-naturedly, of course, that unless they went into teaching they would not be real doctors. I was a doctoral student before I finally learned the original intent of the degree I was seeking.

My initial lack of understanding about these terms was symptomatic of my status as an academic outsider. Research indicates that my peers whose parents had

higher socioeconomic status would have developed a significantly larger vocabulary and better language skills early in life. In addition, they would have received more reinforcement for scholastic achievement. Thus, they would likely have heard their parents use the word *doctor* to refer to professors as well as physicians or to describe career options.

**Lesson 2: I wish I had known the real purpose of college before I started.** I was far along in my studies before I finally learned why most middle- and upper-class families insist that their kids attend a college or university. I had assumed that a college’s only purpose was job training. While I enjoyed reading Ibsen’s plays and learning about the discovery of DNA, I kept wondering how this was making me more employable. Meanwhile, my non-college-going, working-class high school chums were building strong earning skills in practical fields such as barbering, jet engine repair, and telephone installation.

One day, another student recommended a certain course to me, saying the teacher was especially good. My friend was right, and then some. The instructor, a man of conspicuously privileged origins, was enthralling from the start. Besides lecturing, at each meeting, he encouraged us to discuss our views about that day’s topic. I quickly understood his teaching strategy. He wanted everyone to value doubt and curiosity. The only proposition he rejected outright was an unwillingness to wonder and challenge, even if it meant disagreeing with him. He never lowered your grade if your views differed from his.

One afternoon, maybe halfway through the term, the class was debating some point about formal learning and a student began arguing that higher education should be reformed to make it “more relevant.” He wanted college to give people more “job skills, and not all this literature and philosophy stuff.” I was thinking, “My thoughts exactly!” The professor paused for a moment and then explained, “No, the primary purpose of an undergraduate degree is to teach you more ways to enjoy life. Studying literature, politics, science, art, theater, and philosophy should prepare you for a richer existence, not employment. Go to a trade school if you

Some faculty discuss social class in the abstract, but rarely do they describe how socioeconomic forces shape their own campus and their own life.

## For first-generation poor and working-class college students, surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average.

only want job skills.”

There it was: the kind of wisdom that distinguishes great instructors from the rest. This professor’s words washed over me in revelation. How I wish I had known that secret all along. When you grow up hearing family members and neighbors rightly saying that they are lucky to have work, it is hard to think that anyone would spend money on something as ethereal as ensuring that their children have a more enjoyable life rather than a better job.

Since that distant afternoon, I have never heard a better rationale for a liberal arts education. In only a few sentences, this professor had given me an insight that most of my privileged friends treated as a birthright. I finally saw why they valued knowledge for its own sake. As children, they had learned to see the world as a welcoming place where they could expect to succeed. In such a world, higher education served not as an opportunity to better one’s economic chances but rather as a socially accepted way to explore new interests.

Ever since that day, it has seemed ironic to me that those who could most benefit from college—as measured by the value that would be added to their lives—are least likely to attend. Even if everyone from the poor and working classes took the same job they would have had without an undergraduate degree, they would still gain the most from a college education because it would teach them more ways to escape the humdrum existence of everyday employment—knowledge that all should receive, not just those raised in privileged circumstances.

**Lesson 3: I wish I had known that teeth are such a strong social-class marker.** My mother and my grandparents had lost all their teeth early, and my mother always blamed everyone’s dental problems on their having “weak teeth.” If you had “strong teeth,” they pretty much lasted whether you cared for them or not. If you had “weak teeth,” no matter how often you brushed, they still decayed and had to be extracted. Brushing after every meal was unheard of in my house.

As a youngster, I went days without brushing my teeth. My parents never once insisted that I brush my teeth.

I remember my surprise when I started grade school and saw that every one of the teachers still had most if not all of their natural teeth. Granted, they had fillings or sometimes badly stained teeth, but at least they were real teeth, not the perfect kind that I associated with dentures.

By the time I was ten years old, five of my permanent teeth were so rotten that oral surgeons had to remove them. When I started college, all of my teeth had been filled at least once. Based on what I had learned at home, I assumed that nearly everybody over the age of forty wore dentures, and I was well on my way to that fate.

In college, the relationship between dental health and social-class origins was even more obvious. From the first day, I marveled that so many faculty and students had “strong teeth.” Because many of my professors were over forty, I expected that most would wear dentures. I do not recall any who did.

The dental story continued in graduate school. Although most of the school janitors, cafeteria cooks, and maintenance workers had missing teeth or dentures, few of the other M.A. and Ph.D. students or the faculty had visible fillings, and none had false teeth. Some even had “movie star teeth.” Among students and faculty, having “strong teeth” seemed as common as having attended strong elementary and secondary schools. Apparently, the same subtle advantages that provided access to schools with well-paid teachers and superior physical facilities also resulted in mouths with real, dazzling white, and perfectly straight teeth.

After I became a professor, I overheard some colleagues talking about *Nell*, the movie starring Jodie Foster, so I watched it. It was about a twenty-something woman who was a “wild child,” much like the lead character in François Truffaut’s film of that name. Nell lived alone in a cabin in very rural North Carolina and, evidently, spent her entire life beyond the benefits of

# Each first-generation college student should be provided with both a peer and a faculty mentor, preferably ones who are or were first-generation students themselves.

civilization. When Nell first appears partway through the movie and opens her mouth in a close-up, you see that she has movie star teeth. Despite a lifetime living away from modern amenities, Nell has radiant white teeth and no conspicuous dental problems. Laughable! Maybe she just had “strong teeth.” Talk about a movie blooper! It was like seeing a computer sitting on a rock in the movie *One Million Years B.C.* In all my college days, no professor, not even any of the self-proclaimed Marxists, ever mentioned the relationship between social-class origins and dental health. Maybe it was because they all had “strong teeth.” But when you grow up seeing so many people with “weak teeth,” you notice these things.

**Lesson 4: I wish I had known that college is not just for “smart people.”** As a youngster, I had assumed that a degree was well beyond my capabilities. I knew that if I went to college, I would flunk out in the first semester. After all, nobody in my family or neighborhood had finished college, so what were my chances? Moreover, between back surgery and flunking first grade, I started college two years behind my high school cohorts. This gave many of them sufficient lead time to quit or flunk out of college before I even started. This group included a woman who had ranked in the top twenty of our class. These facts, combined with my mediocre high school grades, made me believe that my days in higher education would be numbered. Unlike my peers from high-SES backgrounds, I had gained neither the social nor the intellectual skills necessary for academic and professional success. So like many students from poor and working-class families who fear academic failure, I spent most of my first semester wondering where I would be working come January after receiving my first-term grades.

I had rarely studied in high school, other than a short while the night before a test. I took these study habits to college. Not surprisingly, I did not do well during the early part of my first term, and because my parents had never attended college, I couldn't ask them for advice on how to do better. I had to figure it out on my own. Near the end of the semester, I tried studying several days before each test. I started getting A's and B's.

Still, I feared that I had found religion too late for salvation.

Because my college, like most others, only distributed report cards after each term, I had no idea what grades to expect. I still assumed that I would flunk out. My academic survival hinged on the salvage work that I had done in the last part of that first term. I was astonished when I opened my grades that cold January morning. I did not get my report card until I went to school for second-term registration, meaning that if I had flunked out, the news would have traveled quickly because I would have not been allowed to register. I would have had to leave the building and walk past all the students standing outdoors in line, waiting to enroll. My first-term grades were two B's and three C's—to me, the equivalent of being on the “Nobel Prize Honor Roll.” Although I did not know it then, my newfound study habits would help me make the dean's list every semester after my first year. I barely missed making the list in the second term of my first year. My GPA was 3.22, just 0.03 below the threshold. In my graduate school classes, I got one B and the rest were A's.

I eventually learned that my undergraduate grades shocked others as well. In my junior year, a friend said that a relative of his (whom I will call Tom)—the son of a wealthy family in my hometown—had flunked out of college and was moving home. After helping him return his belongings to his room, his mother sat on the side of his bed and began crying. Tom asked her what was wrong, and she sobbed, “Oh Tom, I just don't understand. If Ken Oldfield can get through college, anyone can. What's wrong with you?!” Tom had been socialized in the ways necessary to succeed in college at all levels, both socially and academically. He, like his peers raised by well-educated and high-earning parents, was statistically more likely than I was to complete advanced and professional degrees. But Tom never did finish college. First-generation poor and working class college students who laugh last . . .

**Lesson 5: I wish I had known that higher education considers debate and argument integral to sound learning.** In my hometown, when two

working-class kids disagreed about something important, they began by speaking louder and louder until one of them backed down. If the matter remained unsettled (meaning that the physically weaker one had not relented), they started fist fighting. After settling the matter, they usually went several months before talking to each other again. Sometimes this silence lasted a lifetime.

In college, everything was upside down, for faculty and students alike. I was shocked to learn that you were *expected* to question other students, in class and out. In the best courses, the professors encouraged you to debate *them*.

During one of my first days on campus, I was sitting at a table in the student union beside two professors and some students. They were all hotly contesting some point. The students appeared to me to be juniors and seniors, and they were just as likely to disagree with one or both professors as they were with each other. I do not recall what they were debating, but I expected to see them fist fighting any second.

I left for class, and when I returned an hour later, I was amazed to see the same people still sitting at the table, warmly chatting about something altogether different, as if there had never been any disagreements. Obviously, there were no hard feelings. I later realized that if anything, these disputes make the contestants better friends. It is still hard for me to accept that sometimes students or faculty pick arguments just to test an idea.

Obviously, no college is free of backbiting and alienation, but first-generation poor and working-class college students should know beforehand that colleges and universities view disagreement as fundamental to quality learning. Exchanging loud words is not the last stage before a fistfight, as I always thought.

**Lesson 6: I wish I had understood how the academy defines work.** Until college, I never realized how much my social-class origins affected how I interpreted the word *work*. During my first few weeks on

campus, I was amazed to see people who could earn a good living doing what professors do, especially given that they never produced anything practical such as haircuts, cars, or toasters. Moreover, all the professors wore formal clothing while on campus. They never went home smelling of work, as my family always did. Faculty could go straight from campus to a fancy restaurant and fit right in. I found this new culture—in which a day's work remained, in large part, invisible—alienating and even intimidating.

Not only did professors not have real bosses who watched over them, but they did not have to work summers and holidays. As a first-year student, I heard someone say that every so many years, professors could take off one semester at full pay. They called it a *sabbatical*, which the dictionary said is Hebrew for “rest.” When I read this, I thought, “Rest!? From what!?” After several semesters, I started thinking, “Maybe I should see about getting into this line of ‘work.’”

Even today, when I hear students or professors claim they are working, I am tempted to say, “You wanna see work!? I’ll show you work! I’ll take you to the greasy spoon my mother and grandmother *worked* in for at least eight hours a day, six days a week, flipping burgers and making French fries while standing on a cement floor. During summers, the kitchen temperature often exceeded 100 degrees. *That’s* work!” The academy taught me why it is called “the working class.”

Finally, I deciphered that faculty say that working-class people have “jobs” but middle- and upper-class folks have “professions.” When I first noticed this distinction, I consulted a dictionary and found that *amateur* comes from the Latin word *amare*, meaning “to love.” An amateur does something for fun, such as playing a pickup game of basketball for grins. The dictionary also said that *professional* means paying people for what they do. Loretta Lynn should have called her autobiography *Professional Coal Miner’s Daughter*.

In “The Quest for Equity: ‘Class’ (Socioeconomic Status) in American Higher Education,” Bowen offers

It is important that we change the campus environment to be inclusive so that privileged students are encouraged to understand and appreciate the values reflected in poor and working-class students’ ways of life.

an especially telling summary of the relationship between SES origins and education. He writes, "It is the long-term, lasting effects of SES on both cognitive and non-cognitive skills (including motivation, attitudes, social skills, and 'proper' behavior) that . . . are the main determinants of differences in educational opportunity. Put another way, poor families have great difficulty investing sufficient resources to develop in their children in the time before high school graduation, the abilities and outlooks necessary to enable their children to attend college and graduate" (pp. 8–9). In short, just by being the son or daughter of high-SES parents, a child gains far more of the social and cultural capital needed to perform better in formal education at all levels.

#### FOUR SUGGESTED REFORMS

**N**OTHING in the preceding paragraphs is meant to disparage anyone in my family or the neighbors that I knew as I was growing up. By definition, none of the people from back then had the privilege of being privileged. They did the best they could with what they had.

That said, I will use the preceding section as a foundation for the four reforms I propose that all institutions adopt to better meet the unique needs of their first-generation poor and working-class students. These reforms are double-edged. On one hand, they involve ways to help students with humble beginnings adjust to and succeed in their new circumstances. On the other hand, they suggest ways to reform the campus learning environment so that it reflects a more diverse socioeconomic reality. The latter changes will help students of high-SES origins gain new insights into social-class matters that differ considerably from the ones they are currently leaving campuses with. At present, colleges and universities mostly reinforce assumptions that privileged individuals bring to higher learning. Thus, the reforms I am suggesting can enhance learning for all students.

**Reform 1: Develop support systems for poor and working-class first-generation college students (FGCSs).** Most colleges and universities have specialty student organizations or research centers to address the needs of particular groups (for example, women, students of color, or GLBTQ students). Institutions should establish comparable facilities to meet the

## A BLEACHER-SEAT VIEW OF CULTURAL CAPITAL: How Bad Is a Dented Bat?

BY CAROL A. LUNDBERG

**I**N MY SIX YEARS of watching Little League baseball, I've learned that the key to success at first base is the ability to stretch like Elastigirl from Disney's movie *The Incredibles* while keeping one foot firmly planted on first base. I don't know how such a stretch is accomplished, but I know that a strategy exists. My favorite first base player has explained it to me. For the other parents sharing these bleachers, most of the baseball training has flowed in the other direction: from parent to child. In our family, the one with baseball expertise is twelve years old. Similarly, for many first-generation college students, the responsibility for understanding the game of higher education and negotiating its path is one they shoulder primarily on their own.

I have become increasingly drawn to the notion of

cultural capital and its explanatory function in regard to the experience of students in higher education, particularly students whose families have not shared the privilege granted by a college education. As I've tried to describe cultural capital to others, both inside the academy and outside, I've had trouble capturing its salience in ways that help people grasp its importance. Then Ian began playing baseball. Through seasons of watching Little League, I've discovered that there is capital in baseball as well, and it functions in some ways that are quite similar to cultural capital. In the realm of baseball capital, my account is quite small. The consequences of that limited account are quite small, which is one way in which it differs markedly from cultural capital.

**I**AN'S FRIEND, Wylie, also plays Little League baseball, but on a different team. Wylie is the son of a baseball-playing father and the nephew of baseball-play-

unique needs of poor and working-class individuals. These centers should help students acquire important cultural capital by showing them how to obtain financial assistance, how to locate and use campus resources, how to minimize costs (for example, by buying used instead of new textbooks or laptop computers), and how to secure reasonable housing. Center directors should organize special orientation meetings for all interested first-generation college students in order to address major challenges that newcomers face, such as selecting appropriate courses, developing effective study habits, taking tests, and writing term papers.

Each FGCS should be provided with both a peer and a faculty mentor, preferably ones who are or were FGCSs themselves. These mentors would help orient their student to the college experience and support the student's transition in the first year. In turn, as sophomores, FGCSs should be encouraged to be peer mentors for new incoming students. Special center advisors could handle issues unique to the junior and senior years, such as questions about résumé writing, standardized test preparation courses, and graduate and professional school admissions. Mentors and center advisors

could identify students who need additional assistance. In the end, these centers would be money-saving ventures. By reducing the FGCS dropout rate by just a few percentage points, these facilities will pay for themselves. Providing these support systems is a productive first step toward assisting FGCSs. Another crucial task is altering the campus environment to address and reduce social-class discrimination.

**Reform 2: Address classism.** The preceding recommendation suggests ways to help FGCSs, particularly poor and working-class students, adjust to the culture of higher learning. It is equally important that we change the campus environment to be inclusive so that privileged students are encouraged to understand and appreciate the values reflected in poor and working-class students' ways of life. Faculty and administrators must encourage *all* students to become multicultural in regard to class issues.

One way of facilitating class multiculturalism is by having faculty members introduce social-class concerns into all their courses. Middle- and upper-class students must be exposed to materials that tell them more about poor and working-class people, promoting an under-

ing uncles. Wylie's dad doesn't play professionally, but his Thursday night recreation team has been a regular part of Wylie's life since before Wylie could hold a baseball. This is one of the reasons why Wylie knows about baseball, its culture, and its rules. Wylie has learned how the game is played in more than one sense of the term. Moreover, he loves baseball. He is as comfortable on the baseball field as he is in his own home.

Unfortunately, Ian has a different baseball heritage. He seems to have some natural talent for the game, talent inherited from someplace other than his parents. Neither his father nor I have played baseball. We try to be supportive by getting Ian to practice on time, buying the equipment he needs (after receiving a list explaining what that is), playing catch in the backyard, and spending many evenings on hard bleachers, cheering him on. We love our little first baseman, and we try to find him the support that will give him the batting average he so desires, but we're learning that we often don't know

what that support should be. This causes me to ponder the ways in which students who enter college with less cultural capital are disadvantaged, not through their ability or their commitment but through having less access to relationships and sources that foster success simply

because the people involved understand higher education and can help students negotiate their way through an often complex maze. That disadvantage can be lessened when faculty and student affairs professionals share their capital with first-generation students. Ernest Pascarella and his colleagues found that engagement in academic and class-related interactions with

peers and faculty paid off better in terms of learning for first-generation students than for others. They suggest that this is because these interactions help compensate for first-generation students' lack of cultural capital. Those new relationships transmit academic content, but they also transmit valuable perspective about the values and workings of higher education.

.....  
When I deduct points for a  
misplaced comma, is that like the  
umpire disqualifying the bat?  
How do I communicate that it is  
just the paper, not the student,  
that must be reconstructed?  
.....



standing of the countless hurdles that students from these backgrounds face while in the academy. A small sampling of possible texts includes Sherry Lee Linkon's *Teaching Working Class*, C. L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law's *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, Betty Hart and Todd Risley's *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, and Mike Rose's *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. The centers that I described earlier could maintain databases of resources for faculty and student use.

Faculty should not confine their socioeconomic instructional efforts to studying the generic consequences of class. Students should be encouraged to research how SES plays out on their campus. They might, for example, compare the social-class origins of (1) fraternity and sorority members versus nonmembers; (2) professors versus campus service workers (for example, janitors, cafeteria cooks); or (3) in-state versus out-of-state students. These hands-on studies could be especially effective in fostering students' appreciation of the long-term consequences of widely divergent socioeconomic backgrounds.

Finally, because professors are products of the sys-

tem they are trying to transform, shifting the campus environment to include more social-class concerns will be as educational for many of them as it is for their students. Faculty members gain the highest return on investment when their intellectual travels take them far beyond their comfort zone, something the recommended reforms would surely do. Addressing classism requires changing faculty perspectives; it also requires changing the makeup of the faculty.

**Reform 3: Diversify the social-class origins of the faculty.** Bringing more diverse faculty perspectives to a campus enhances its learning environment. A similar rationale has been used to justify changing the race and gender composition of the faculty of an institution. Schools should expand their job notices to include wording that encourages persons from poor and working-class origins to apply. A background questionnaire that surveys socioeconomic origins should be included with all applications. All job applicants of humble origins should receive special attention in the selection process.

Nothing reconfigures the professoriate's assumptions about merit more than asking them to reinterpret

**L**AST WEEK, Ian's bat was deemed unworthy to be used in the game. It had a dent that we didn't know about, so they disqualified the bat. It was only his bat that was thrown out of the game, but Ian felt a bit disqualified himself. The dent rule was probably written somewhere in the packet of information we received from the league, but I never noticed. Later, Wylie's dad explained the rule to me. More important than clarifying the rule, Wylie's dad communicated to me through his demeanor that trying to use a dented bat was not a major offense. When I deduct points for a misplaced comma, is that like the umpire disqualifying the bat? Students tell me that because a comma is so small, its offense should not be so great. That's precisely what I thought about the dent in the bat! How do I communicate that it is just the paper, not the student, that must be reconstructed? Perhaps the students who are most vulnerable are those who don't have parents, friends, or family to help them make sense of the higher education system, replete with unwritten rules and punishments. My argument is not that we should lower standards but that we should be explicit about those standards and that we should keep our eyes out for the players who feel sidelined by them.

**P**RIOR TO Ian's most recent baseball game, a friend told him that he had overheard the coach say that Ian would be pitching. In Little League baseball, pitcher

is the coveted position. As we approached the last fifteen minutes of the game, Ian still had not pitched. The coach brought in a new pitcher, but not Ian. As the last few minutes of the game went by, I spent my time trying to have a good attitude, telling myself that it's worthwhile to work so hard for baseball, that Ian really likes it, that he is learning lessons of character. I'm embarrassed to admit that I also found myself thinking that maybe we could talk him into letting this be his last year, that maybe baseball isn't the sport for him. Maybe we should switch our efforts to music. Ian's dad played in the band; his grandmother was a music teacher; and Ian enjoys playing musical instruments. Perhaps this is the mental conversation that takes place in the minds of students when the promise of academic success doesn't go as planned. Does the successful grocery store clerk who goes to college wonder how much longer she can endure long hours in the library, school loans, and mediocre grades without giving up on her college education? Who comes alongside her to bolster her hopes

*Carol A. Lundberg* is associate professor of higher education at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California. Her research focuses on models of success for nontraditional and under-represented students.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Marcia Baxter Magolda ([aboutcampus@muohio.edu](mailto:aboutcampus@muohio.edu)), and please copy her on notes to authors.

the concept in a quest for greater faculty diversity. Paul Light shows in his article “‘Not Like Us’: Removing the Barriers to Recruiting Minority Faculty” that this new view of personnel selection need not come at the expense of quality. Considering social class in faculty hiring can reduce classist assumptions on the part of faculty and staff, bring diverse perspectives to campus, and support all students’ success.

**Reform 4: Diversify the social-class origins of the student body.** A primary reason for recruiting more students of humble origins to enter higher education is to improve the learning environment by bringing a more diverse collection of opinions and experiences to campuses. All institutions should collect and maintain information on their students’ socioeconomic backgrounds. Review committees should weigh information on social-class origin when deciding on admissions. Carnevale and Rose suggest that we view merit as a fluid concept: “While all striving has merit, striving against physical, social, economic, and cultural barriers is regarded as especially meritorious. In American culture, merit is measured not only by where one stands, but also by how far one had to go to get there.

Americans are still willing to give special breaks to people who show ‘the right stuff’ in overcoming barriers” (p. 6). Considering social class in admissions could ensure a strong contingent of poor and working-class FGCSs in the classroom, a critical mass that would help these students feel comfortable on campus and that would improve the quality of the learning environment for all students.

## CONCLUSION

**C**OLLECTING DATA on the socioeconomic origins of students and faculty would allow institutions to monitor the effectiveness of the proposed social-class-based diversity efforts. These data could help gauge retention rates, help staff and faculty understand the mix of SES backgrounds on each campus, help track academic majors and minors by SES origins, allow follow-up on students’ application rates for graduate and professional schools, and aid in identifying grade point average problems among poor and working-class FGCSs. In short, schools should use data on socioeconomic origin to assess which policies are most

for the education she so eagerly sought at the beginning of her higher education journey? Laura Rendón studied first-generation students who were much like this grocery store checker and found that the key to their persistence was another person who validated their experience, believed they were capable of success, and acknowledged the value of their achievements. Another person noticed, came alongside them, and inspired the student to continue.

As I sat in the bleachers last Friday, contemplating my strategy for cutting short my son’s future in baseball, Wylie’s dad sat down next to me. I told him my story, and he reminded me of some earlier games when Ian got some great hits, pitched lots of strikes, and felt good about his success. He gave me some perspective that made me willing to sit through some more games, to buy a new bat, and to support my boy in what he wants to do. He was what Marcia Baxter Magolda might describe as good company.

Earlier today, a student came to me with a question about statistics, but she ended up telling me that her internship supervisor doesn’t give her any meaningful

tasks and seems to think that she is incompetent. My student worries that she has nothing to offer the field of student affairs. This is a dark secret that she had kept to herself all year, confronting it daily. As she wept, I tried to be good company. She has much to offer our field. I tried to encourage her not to switch sports just because she doesn’t pitch.

**D**URING a recent baseball game, a parent was describing a good deal she found on a certain type of undershirt that the players needed. I had never heard of

the undershirt she described, and I didn’t understand why it was important, but I nodded my head in feigned understanding and asked for directions to the store where the elusive undergarment was sold. The undershirt wasn’t on the list of items the players needed, but I had already figured out that the list didn’t include things that were obvious, like the special undershirt. Later, I asked Wylie about how I might recognize this particular undershirt and where I might find it in a store. Thankfully, he filled me in on the details.

The undershirt incident reminded me of the par-

.....  
My argument is not that  
we should lower standards but  
that we should keep our eyes out  
for the players who feel  
sidelined by them.  
.....

effective in addressing the needs of first-generation students from poor and working-class backgrounds. These data should prove especially helpful in identifying students who need individual interventions to facilitate their success.

One goal of these proposed campus reforms is to change the college environment to better reflect the needs and values of students who are first in their family to seek a college degree, especially those from humble economic backgrounds. An equally important goal is to strive for social equity by educating all students and faculty about social-class dynamics. Perhaps then the six lessons I wish I had learned before going to college would be easier for poor and working-class first-generation college students to learn, easing their cultural journey. If my professor is right that an undergraduate education is supposed to teach people how to lead richer lives, a significant part of this campaign should involve exposing all students to the hopes, values, and everyday realities of poor and working-class individuals. In this way, higher education can expand the social and intellectual horizons of *all* its participants.

#### NOTES

Bourdieu, P. "The Forms of Capital." In J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

- Bowen, W. G. "Lecture II: The Quest for Equity: 'Class' (Socioeconomic Status) in American Higher Education." Paper presented at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Distinguished Lecture Series, University of Virginia, Apr. 7, 2004.
- Bowen, W. G., Kurzweil, M. A., and Tobin, E. M., in collaboration with Pichler, Susanne C. *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005.
- Carnevale, A. P., and Rose, S. J. *Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions*. New York: Century Foundation, March 2003. [[http://www.tcf.org/Publications/Education/carnevale\\_rose.pdf](http://www.tcf.org/Publications/Education/carnevale_rose.pdf)]. Retrieved Jan. 1, 2006.
- Dews, C.L.B., and Law, C. L. (eds.). *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- Hart, B., and Risley, T. R. *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. Baltimore, Md.: Paul H. Brookes, 1995.
- Light, P., "Not Like Us': Removing the Barriers to Recruiting Minority Faculty." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 1994, 13(1), 164–179.
- Linkon, S. L. (ed.). *Teaching Working Class*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.
- Lynn, L., with Vecsey, G. *Coal Miner's Daughter*. Chicago: Regnery, 1976.
- Rose, M. *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. New York: Viking, 2004.

*Thanks to Elsie Bilderback and Madolyn Kimberly for helping with this project.*



ent orientation programs I conducted at a university that served many first-generation students. We paraded faculty and administrators out to make presentations and answer questions that parents had about the university. For the most part, parents sat silently, politely listening. Then we introduced a flock of students who sat with parents at round tables, talked about their experiences, and answered questions. This was when the parents engaged. This is when the real questions emerged. Questions that would never be uttered to the vice president in the blue suit were asked in hushed tones to students wearing shorts and T-shirts. They were questions like "My daughter tells me she has class only three days a week. Why are classes not held every day, like they have been for the previous twelve years?" If real learning is to occur in our institutions, we must create relationships with students and perhaps even with their families—relationships in which necessary questions can be asked. We must also encourage and reward relationships among students that make them feel safe in asking questions of one another.

**I**N THE GAME of education, faculty members, student affairs professionals, and experienced students have lots of capital. We cannot influence every decision, every play that happens in the lives of our students, but we can be good company. We can provide the perspective of one who has played longer, who understands the game better. Perhaps most important, we can recognize a disheartened player, a student with questions he dares not ask, or a weary mother for whom quitting the game looks better than finishing the game.

#### NOTES

- Baxter Magolda, M. B. *Making Their Own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-Development*. Sterling, Va.: Stylus, 2001.
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., and Terenzini, P. T. "First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes." *Journal of Higher Education*, 2004, 75, 249–284.
- Rendón, L. I. "Helping Nontraditional Students Be Successful in College: We Have the Power to Help Students Redefine Themselves." *About Campus*, 1998, 2(6), 2–3.



Copyright of *About Campus* is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.