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
• 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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