

Book Review

Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality.
Elizabeth A. Armstrong & Laura T. Hamilton.
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In *Paying for the Party: How Colleges Maintain Inequality*, authors Elizabeth Armstrong and Karen Hamilton argue the critical importance of the structure of both academic and social life in shaping students' experiences during college and social class mobility, or the lack of, after college. As the authors indicate, they did not set out to study social class in college. Rather, their initial study was focused on the college environment as a platform for studying sexuality. As the study evolved, however, the authors realized that the social classed-nature of the experiences of students in their study (and consequently, higher education in general) was too pervasive to ignore. As the authors acknowledged early on in the text,

I don't know how this project has become so much about class. Indeed, there was no escaping this fact as the study proceeded. We were greatly disappointed to find that the young women, similar except for class background, left college with vastly different life prospects (p. xii).

Throughout the course of the book, Armstrong and Hamilton artfully present findings from their five-year qualitative study that highlight the role that social class played in every facet of these students' lives in college and after their time at the institution ended.

Early in the book, Armstrong and Hamilton contextualize their work as existing within a larger societal paradigm that believes anyone can rise to the top if they work hard enough; this notion is the crux of the American Dream. Within this context, higher education is seen as a crucial outlet for upward social and economic mobility. Unfortunately, as the authors illustrate, "Students sometimes develop educational expectations and goals inconsistent with the class resources available to them" (p. 22). This reality seems to be left out of the larger picture about who is and is not included in higher education and who has access to social mobility through higher education.

This text is largely devoted to illuminating the ways in which social class background influences every aspect of the college experience from selecting the appropriate residence hall, choosing a major, navigating social life, access to dispensable financial resources, and availability of a backup plan through parental involvement. Armstrong and Hamilton argue that most higher education institutions have a largely unintentional sorting process that moves students

onto specific pathways. They dub these pathways *the party pathway*, *the mobility pathway*, and *the professional pathway*. An eye-opening finding from this study is the overwhelming social isolation of college students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. The students from lower SES backgrounds in Armstrong and Hamilton's study arrived at college knowing very few students, if any. This was in stark contrast to their peers from higher SES backgrounds who arrived on campus with a social network already in place. The authors discussed how these networks, or the lack of a social network, influenced experiences in college and post-college for all of the students in the study. In Armstrong and Hamilton's work, this social isolation for students from low SES backgrounds was captured in simple events like having another person to go to dinner with in the dining hall. One lower SES student expressed to the researchers how lonely she was in college and nearly broke down in tears as she shared her experiences with members of the research team.

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Paying for the Party, overall, provides readers with a missing piece in the literature on the experiences of students who are first-generation and from low-income backgrounds. Higher education literature has traditionally focused on this unique population of students by exploring how parents' income or occupational prestige influences how students spend their time in college (e.g., students from lower SES backgrounds tend to work significantly more than their higher SES peers and tend to be less involved in extra-curricular activities on campus). Armstrong and Hamilton, however, add complexity to the literature on social class in higher education by illustrating the less tangible and measurable ways in which social class impacts the lives of students from low SES backgrounds.

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There are a few key strengths of this text that readers should note when considering *Paying for the Party*. First, this book is in an exemplar of qualitative, ethnographic research in higher education and represents more than simply a fascinating and compelling story. Methodologically, readers can view this text as a primer for allowing participants' stories to drive a qualitative study in spite of researcher assumptions and a priori understandings. Further, the authors provide

multiple appendices that go into detail describing their research processes and important ethical considerations over the course of their research; both of these resources offer insight into the research process and can be instructive for other researchers. Another strength of Armstrong and Hamilton's book is the way in which it adds complexity to the study of social class in higher education. As the authors indicate, they want to highlight how "messy" social class really is in the lives of individuals, and in this case, in the lives of college students. Although the vast majority of research on students from lower social class backgrounds uses proxies such as parental income, parental education, or parental occupational prestige, these authors reveal other social class markers that emerged in their work such as divorce, chronic illness, death of a parent, or loss of a job. Further, the overwhelming majority of the research on social class or related phenomena (e.g., being from a low-income family or of the first generation in one's family to attend college) explores various forms of capital that influence what a student knows about navigating the college environment; however, as Armstrong and Hamilton indicate, there are many of other social class markers and artifacts (e.g., language/speech, clothing, accessories, hobbies, interest in a party culture) that play an integral role in how students from lower social class backgrounds experience college.

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This text indeed has the potential to expand educators' understanding of students from a variety of social class backgrounds. Notably, this book is a telling indictment of higher education's complicity in allowing students from lower social class backgrounds to endure further marginalization during the college years, particularly at large, public research institutions like the one featured in this study. The party pathway described in the text clearly dominated at the institution in the study and likely dominates on many college campuses across the country. This pathway and the social network it offers are not accessible for all students. Overall, this text provides a wake-up call for educators to pay more attention to the student culture and institutional practices on campus that ultimately isolate students from lower social class backgrounds rather than help them achieve the upward social mobility that higher education has long promised.