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Abstract

Community colleges have long been regarded as the common entry point to postsecondary education for low-income students. However, researchers often mention “low-income students” without a clear definition of what that means, except perhaps that the students in their study received Pell Grants and other types of financial aid. Terina Roberson Lathe provides a better understanding of what it means to be a working class student pursuing a community college degree beyond the “low-income” or “Pell Grant eligible” labels to show how these students are perceived by the faculty who teach them. Lathe argues that the education system privileges students in the middle to upper classes and to continue to ignore class-based differences is to continue to underserve students who already face enormous challenges in schools.

Disciplines

Community College Leadership | Higher Education

Comments

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Book review

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THE WORKING CLASS STUDENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ADDRESSING A CLASS-BASED UNDERSTANDING

By: Terina Roberson Lathe
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books
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Community colleges have long been regarded as the common entry point to postsecondary education for low-income students. However, researchers often mention “low-income students” without a clear definition of what that means, except perhaps that the students in their study received Pell Grants and other types of financial aid. Terina Roberson Lathe provides a better understanding of what it means to be a working class student pursuing a community college degree beyond the “low-income” or “Pell Grant eligible” labels to show how these students are perceived by the faculty who teach them. Lathe argues that the education system privileges students in the middle to upper classes and to continue to ignore class-based differences is to continue to underserve students who already face enormous challenges in schools.

The first chapter introduces the concept of “working class,” the assumptions embedded in this term, and the three frameworks she used to better understand students who identify as such. A functionalist framework, for example, understands that class differences are an almost natural part of society because the most capable or most talented will do better than their lesser counterparts. On the other hand, a conflict framework takes on a Marxist and Weberian interpretation in seeing class differences as a struggle for power over the means of production. Finally, the interactionist/interpretivist framework Lathe describes Bordieu’s concepts of social, cultural, and educational capital. In the end, she proposes a literature-based definition of “what it is ‘to be’ working class” (p. 20) that, among other things, entails a certain degree of economic insecurity; physical or manual labor as employment; a deep value for family; and a distrust of education not rooted in workforce training. These various characteristics are discussed in more detail in chapter 2, and Lathe explains working class differences as they contribute to a distinct cultural group with shared values and language. A distrust of higher education and a general disdain for asking for assistance are two attributes that may present themselves as obstacles for working class students in community colleges.

In chapter 3, Lathe presents the stories of 10 faculty members at an urban community college who speak about the experience in teaching working class students. One faculty member, Maria, gives one of the most memorable descriptions of what it means to be working class: “If one takes a shower before work, one is middle class, but if one takes a shower after work, one is working class” (p. 39). Ultimately, as discussed in this chapter and in chapter 4, what appears clearly is

that a number of the faculty who participated in Lathe's study identify as working class themselves or exhibit empathy toward these students, but there is a level of discomfort for how to talk about class or address it in their teaching.

Perhaps the most important finding from this study that is discussed at length in the final chapters is faculty members' argument that working class students need to "learn college," or learn how to adequately navigate the institution. This finding gets at the tension that Lathe discussed in her first chapter: educational systems are based on middle and upper class norms that privilege students from these classes. In effect, higher education was not built to support working class students. Faculty also expressed frustration at working class students' desire to pursue education for higher paying jobs over personal growth and improvement. However well-meaning the faculty at this community college are, Lathe's work shows that there is still room to better understand working class students, their backgrounds, and to validate their values as they pertain to pursuing a postsecondary credential.

The Working Class Student in Higher Education aims to isolate social class as the focus of this scholarly piece, but to do so leaves some glaring omissions in this work. Lathe provides very little detail on the context of this study such as the geographic location of the college, the demographics of the student population it serves, or details about the faculty who participated in this study. She also divorces class-based experiences from race, ethnicity, and gender, among other identities of difference. This leads the reader to assume that this book focuses on the white working class student's experience in higher education. Other work, such as Armstrong and Hamilton (2013), focused on the experience of all white female participants at a flagship university for the explicit purpose of trying to "control" for class in their qualitative study, and this decision and how it was executed in the research design was explained at length. Similar explanation or a limitations section to acknowledge this lack of intertwined identities would strengthen Lathe's work. Given the diversity of the community college student population, more work is needed to understand how a working class background impacts the lives of students from non-dominant communities, including African-American and Latinx students.

Considering the mission and tradition of community colleges to serve as a low-cost entry point into higher education, this work is important as a starting point for understanding what it means to exist below the middle class in the United States. Lathe is convincing in her argument that regardless of how uncomfortable it may be to talk about class, this is a critical conversation if community college administrators, practitioners, and scholars want to engage in work that is truly reflective of students' lives.

References:

Armstrong, E.A., & L.T. Hamilton. (2013). *Paying for the Party: How college maintains inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.