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The pedagogy of college access programs: A critical analysis

College access programs should shift the pedagogy that they employ to one that positions first-generation college students as *actors in* and *owners of* their own transition process.

Despite the proliferation of college access programs, limited attention has been given to differences in the ways low-income and affluent students acquire and employ social and academic capital to gain access to the college of their choosing. Similarly, little attention has been given to the pedagogy that frames college access programs, including a deeper understanding that college-going capital is very rarely built through direct instruction. Rather it is deeply rooted in a series of personal experiences of college campuses built over long periods of time. While lack of access to "dominant"[1] resources of social and cultural capital (Carter, 2003) has been clearly established in the college access literature as an important barrier to higher education, many researchers indicate the need for a better understanding of the complex, multifaceted nature of how these resources function.

This critical essay is based on ethnographic research that followed thirteen students (from different social classes and racial background) through the college application process during their senior year of high school[2] (Bloom, 2007). The study's purpose was to understand the accumulation and use of social and cultural capital by critically analyzing the resources first-generation students and families appear to lack. Moreover, the study was concerned with identifying important social and cultural resources that middle- and upper-middle-class students and families bring to the college transition.

This essay asks: What are the processes through which students develop concrete college aspirations and a sense of efficacy in pursuing those aspirations? How is an understanding of the landscape of higher education (the differences between public and private, small and large, liberal arts or vocational colleges, etc.) built over time, and what exactly leads students to consider—or not consider—more selective institutions and schools across a greater geographic range? What kinds of social networks are needed to successfully navigate the application process? In each of these areas, the study attempts to move beyond noting differences across race and class to exploring the processes through which these differences are created.

[1] Carter (2003) posits a conceptual distinction between "dominant" and "non-dominant" cultural capital. She argues that there is an "ethnocentric bias in the conventional use of cultural capital. Cultural capital's significance is often predicated on the experiences of the dominant social class; the multiple ways cultural resources of other groups also convert into capital are ignored" (p. 137).

[2] Six of the students came from families where parents held B.A.s, while seven were first-generation college-goers. Seven were Latino, three were African American, and three were Caucasian.

Three specific areas in relation to access to dominant social and cultural capital are addressed:

1. What Appadurai (2004) has termed the "capacity to aspire" by students from differing backgrounds, as it relates to higher education,
2. Students' knowledge of the landscape of higher education and their choice process as they consider a range of institutions, and
3. The ways that students and families navigate the actual college application process.

Finally, the essay addresses the pedagogy behind many existing college access programs. Specifically, it assesses programs' knowledge about crucial but subtle differences in resources across race and class, including ability to provide true access to the kinds of institutional supports that middle- and upper-income students have. Moreover, the ways that college access programs do (or do not) position first-generation college-going students as actors and owners of their own transition process are addressed. In doing so, this essay hopes to raise important—but currently unasked—questions about the pedagogy of college access programs, and illuminate why some current programs may not be successfully ameliorating existing inequities.

Strengths and limitations of college access programs

Surveys of college access literature in the past ten years (Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002; Kinzie et al, 2004; Social Science Research Council, 2005; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001) all note significant differences across social class in sensitivity to and concerns with college costs and financial aid, in academic preparedness for college, and in specific aspirations toward and knowledge of the landscape of college.

The explosive growth in college access programming is a response to the increasing awareness of these realities in the world of research, policy, and practice. Swail and Perna (2001, 2002) report on some of the most common goals and components of these programs, such as promotion of college attendance, college awareness and college exposure, building of student self-esteem, provision of role models, increased high school retention and completion, and involvement of parents. Program components often mirror these goals: college awareness activities, social-skill development, campus visitations and cultural activities, academic enrichment, and study-skills training. In a survey of the most successful programs in 12 states, Cunningham, Redmond, and Merisotis (2003) note a focus on awareness and academic enrichment services, counseling, mentoring and parent involvement, as well as a lack of actual financial incentives to attend college.

As these lists make clear, access programs for the most part do not and cannot address some of the central barriers that first-generation college students face in accessing higher education. They are unable to affect the macroeconomic policies that shape college costs, the value of real income, and state and federal government financial aid policy. Further, they cannot change larger social inequities that create or deny access to adequate academic preparation for higher education, tied as these things are to demographic segregation, public school funding, and a lack of qualified teachers in high-need areas. The focus of almost all of the programs, then, is on individual-level barriers: attempting to raise college aspirations and to provide the kinds of college-going social and cultural capital to which first-generation students may not have access.

Theorizing social and cultural capital

Given the constraints under which college access programs are working, it may be that this is all that they can be asked to

do. If so, it is even more crucial that the work they do to build social and cultural capital comes out of a sophisticated understanding of the processes through which these resources work in students' college choice and application process, and thus attempt to create a pedagogy that is grounded in this theoretical understanding. Despite some of the recent attention to "cultural" issues in the literature, college access programs too often ignore the complex underlying mechanisms through which social and cultural capital work and address disparities in simplistic ways, practicing the kind of "banking" methods that Freire names as educationally oppressive: "The scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits" (1970, p. 72).

The capacity to aspire: The space between desire and aspiration

Both quantitative status attainment literature from the 1970s and 80s and more recent work on college choice and transition (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Stage & Hossler, 1989) name the development of college expectations and aspirations as important first steps in the college choice process. Recent studies show that, at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, almost all parents and students articulate a desire for higher education; at the same time, these studies continue to find variances in aspirations which point to differences in social and cultural capital as their source.

What inhabits the subtle space between desire and aspiration? And what does it mean for programs hoping to increase aspirations towards higher education among first-generation college-going students? Mickelson (1990) posits a difference between "concrete" and "abstract" attitudes—based on contradictions between students' personal experience and widely held social beliefs in ideologies such as the "American Dream"—that begins to make sense of these results. Appadurai's notion of differences in "the capacity to aspire" across social class captures the source of this space more concretely, and in many ways describes the differences in aspirations seen between groups of students in this study. Across social class, these aspirations were not different in kind; all of the students aspired to go on to four-year colleges after high school. Rather, their aspirations differed in their specificity, their ability to imagine and describe the future that they were reaching for, and what Appadurai talks about as the "stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes" (2004, p. 68).

In the study, high school seniors were asked to write a short scenario to describe the first day of the upcoming September. The answers below represent the kinds of differences in the capacity to aspire that Appadurai suggests:

"I'm at McGill University, UPenn, University of Vermont or St. Lawrence studying anthropology. I have a good group of friends and am part of a lot of school organizations." (female, middle class, white)

"I will have moved my stuff into my dorm during the previous week. I will attend my first class of the year and later eat lunch at one of the on-campus cafes. I will be at a Vassar-like place with a small but beautiful campus. The library is even a place I will enjoy being in. I will live in a single but have a lot of neighbors surrounding me." (female, middle class, white)

"I don't really know, I'm just thinking positive and hoping for the best." (female, working class, black)

"I'll be in college—I don't know which one yet. I don't have a picture in my head." (female, working class, Latina)

Thus, students did not differ across social class in their aspiration or desire to go to college, but in their access to experiences which allowed them to imagine what this meant; to picture and hope for particular college destinations, and to understand the "relationship of aspirations and outcomes" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 68) necessary to chart their way from here to there. A distinct difference in the sense of agency these students display also comes through clearly in the quotes: "I will," and "I have," as opposed to "hoping for the best." Noting these more subtle details means that we must shift from asking:"What is needed to increase college aspirations among first-generation students?" to "How can these students be supported in developing what Fine & McClelland refer to as a 'thick desire'[3] (2006, p. 300) for higher education?" This kind of desire is one that is grounded in meaningful

[3] Fine & McClelland describe this as a "broad range of desires for meaningful intellectual, political, and social engagement" (2006, p. 300).

experiences, and allows them to feel in control of charting their future.

Understanding the landscape of higher education

Similar to the specificity of their college dreams and aspirations, many middle-class students exhibit a sophisticated understanding of the landscape of higher education. There is little doubt that this knowledge has its source in resources of social and cultural capital, but just how those resources are built and utilized so as to result in what appears to middle-class students (and their families) as an utterly natural set of understandings is not well understood.

This study suggests some answers to this question, which, while not surprising, have important implications for college access programming. College-going capital is very rarely built through direct instruction; instead, it is deeply rooted in a series of personal experiences of college campuses built over long periods of time. It is built through visits, summer programs, and connections with family and friends stretching over students' lifetimes, and utilized in increasingly intense ways as they enter high school. For example, one young middle-class woman explained in a series of conversations how she had built and finalized her list of colleges by drawing on a wide array of contacts, experiences, and contexts.

"I loved BU; I was there in a six-week summer program last summer … I was down at NYU last week for an interview with a friend of my mom's who is the head of the law school … I have a friend who goes to art school in Winston-Salem … Yeah, I have a friend who goes to Oberlin … my cousin went to the Berklee College of Music."

This use of social capital is exactly what Coleman talks about in describing the concept as "the value of aspects of social structure to actors as resources they can use to achieve their interests" (1988, p. S101). It is used by middle-class families to create a series of experiences of college campuses, college life, the differences between institutions of higher education, and the nuances of the college application process. On the other hand, a working-class immigrant mother noted the impact of the lack of this kind of network of social contacts and experiences on her and her daughter's comprehension of higher education in the United States.

"We don't have American friends. I work in the morning, my husband works in the evenings, and we do not socialize with other families, other American persons. We are just close to my mother, my sister and brother, no one else … so sometimes I think it is just a little harder to learn more. About this country, about how things are. Because even if you read, you don't—it's not like someone who is giving you advice or suggesting because of an experience—it's not the same. It's not the same."

Building college-going cultural capital around the landscape of higher education is therefore necessarily a social and relational activity that requires interpersonal contact with a wide range of actors over time: these contacts are then used to create a set of experiences foundational to understanding that landscape.

These experiences and social contacts—and the social context in which this range of colleges is simply a given—also encourage students to feel comfortable applying to higher-quality institutions across a wider geographic range. In one conversation with a young man from a middle-class background, he talked about leaving New York to go to school in San Francisco:

Aaron: When I was receiving letters, I was thinking more about maybe going away, because I don't know if I want to spend four years in the City. As much as I love it, I just want to get away. Someplace different.

Janice: So San Francisco was an easy choice? It's far.

Aaron: Yeah. I don't mind. It's a great city, really pretty. I don't really mind if it's a long plane ride … I'll just sleep the whole ride.

In this conversation, Aaron demonstrates his comfort with airplane rides, his knowledge of a city three thousand miles away, and a sense that he is choosing colleges as much as they are choosing him. This allows him to consider a wide range of institutions, and to be less intimidated applying to high-quality institutions where he may risk rejection.

Low-income students of color, on the other hand, often lack access to these experiences and contexts with which to imagine going across the country for college, and what that might mean in their lives. They do not see many students like themselves at top

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institutions in the media, and this also makes it more difficult for them to risk rejection or to imagine themselves there. This sense of both physical and psychological distance can be seen in first-generation students' comments as they struggled to comprehend and make their choices about life after high school. Rather than something familiar and imaginable, college appeared as an idealized world that they longed to enter. "It was like an episode of *Friends*," one reflected wistfully after returning from a visit to Bucknell in November.

And in a conversation about college opportunities, a group of low-income students of color exhibited their conflicting feelings and perceptions of their options for college. While most agreed that "there is plenty of money for scholarships" and "everybody has the same opportunity, it's your choice if you go or not," when asked whether it was true or false that "Most Americans today go to college," one student responded, "You mean the white people? I'm not racist, but most people [who go] are white and have money."

Navigating the Application Process

Finally, this study found profound differences in access with regard to what Stanton-Salazar (1997) terms "institutional support" (p. 10) for navigating the college application process. As Lareau (2000) and Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau (2003) indicate, in relation to elementary school children, middle-class parents are often embedded—through both their careers and residential locations—in networks of professionals who can provide instrumental help with various concrete parts of the process. These networks provide advice, help set up interviews, or otherwise negotiate access to institutional actors on college campuses for middle-class young people. Middle-class parents also feel comfortable coming in, calling, and e-mailing teachers and college counselors with questions throughout the course of students' senior year (and sometimes as early as freshman year of high school). A college counselor at one school with a large population of middle-class students warned teachers, "The knob gets turned pretty hard this year with parents—you'll be getting a *lot* of e-mail." Based on watching who visited the college counseling office often, their children confidently utilized this resource as well.

These parents also provided significant individual help to their children as they navigated the college application process. One young woman explained, "My dad's been helping a lot. He gets the applications offline, and I fill it out on paper. Then he puts it in online." Another middle class student concurred, "My dad's helped—for a lot of stuff I don't understand, he does. Even with him helping me, I feel like I can't get it right sometimes."

On the other hand, young people from low-income backgrounds who are the first in their families to attend college are much less likely to have any of these specific and institutional resources available to them as they navigate the details of the college application process. Few, if any members of their immediate family can help them research schools, find and fill out applications, edit essays, and complete financial aid forms. Their families are far less likely to be embedded in networks that can provide help with these tasks (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2000). Further, neither they nor their families have the same sense of comfort in asking for this help from institutional school actors (Lareau, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Finally, as so much of the existing research has found, poor and working-class parents, the majority of whom did not attend college themselves, are rarely able to offer the very specific kinds of administrative help to their children that middle-class parents can.

What is important to observe here are the multiple and institutionally embedded kinds of help that are needed for even middle-class students to navigate the complexities of the college application process. Far too often, these supports are invisible to policymakers, to those who work in high schools and colleges, and to students and parents themselves, across social class. College access programs hoping to equalize the playing field need to be cognizant of this, and strive to replicate these resources and "enabling conditions" (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 325), not within students, but within and through institutions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE: TRANSFORMING THE PEDAGOGY OF TRANSITION

Today's college access programs should design interventions that are cognizant of the fact that there are profound differences between low- and high-income students in their lived experiences that build important social and cultural capital to gain access to college. Programs should attempt to simulate the processes by which advantaged students gain familiarity about the landscape of higher education and develop networks of people that can provide critical knowledge about applying for college and financial aid.

1. Redesign the pedagogy of college access programs.
College access programs should shift the pedagogy that they employ to one that positions first-generation college students as actors and owners of their own transition process.

Tierney and Auerbach write that the "banking or transmission model of information transfer is inadequate for parent education" (2005, p. 45); the same holds true for students. Despite this, existing college access curriculum often reflects a very simplistic approach to providing college-going capital to first-generation students. It tends to talk at (e.g., giving motivational speeches and showing earnings charts of college graduates), or give lists to (e.g., having students page through dense college guidebooks), rather than asking students what they are wondering or are worried about, or providing experiences in which the students discover answers for themselves. Middle-class students' social and cultural capital are almost never built or utilized through practices of direct instruction. By the same logic, first-generation students need programs that engage them as subjects and inquirers, and allow them to build knowledge through their own experience at the same time that they widen the range of social contexts in which these experiences take place.

For example, these students need to visit a wide range of college campuses (i.e., private and public, large and small, urban and suburban) for themselves, beginning in 9th grade at the latest. This must be an essential program component, rather than seen as an add-on. Along with this, students' exploration of higher education options should be framed as an inquiry rather than a command: not "you must go to college," but "why do people go to college?" Students should be given the opportunity to ask these questions of a wide range of people in their own family and community, on college campuses, and beyond. Finally, programs need to confront hard questions about financial aid and the costs of college, the racial and class balance on college campuses, and the job market. First-generation students are deeply concerned about these issues; pretending questions are not there is more likely to keep them away than to encourage them toward college.

2. Foster college-going capital through more intensive engagement with institutions of higher education.
Higher education must play a role in providing comprehensive access to the kind of institutional supports that middle- and upper-income students often take for granted in the application process. Hagedorn and Tierney discuss the need to "engage those institutions and groups that hold capital to become more responsive" (2002, p. 5). Many of the resources that these students need in order to build their college-going capital reside only on college campuses. Instead of offering 45-minute tours, colleges should bring students in for lengthier and repeated visits, and give them a chance to ask their own questions and talk with real "actors" on campuses (faculty, deans, student life administrators, students). Students should have opportunities to take college classes, not just in order to accumulate free credits through dual-enrollment, but as a way to understand the new kinds of pedagogy and expectations that will face them in college. Finally, current college students—who could play an invaluable role in widening first-generation students' social networks, and offering them a range of visions of what they are aspiring to, and the routes people take to get there—should be involved with college transition work with first-generation students.

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