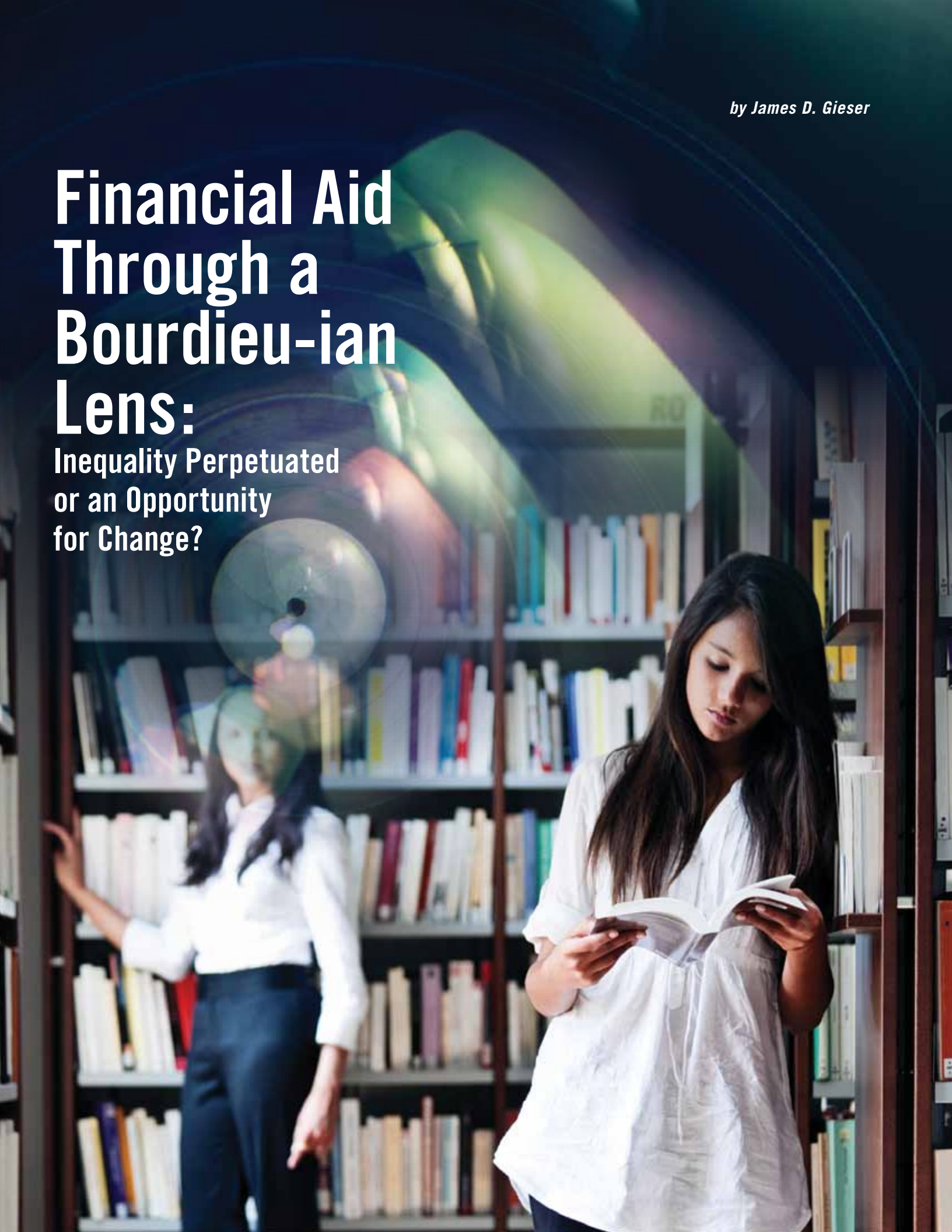


by James D. Gieser

Financial Aid Through a Bourdieu-ian Lens:

Inequality Perpetuated
or an Opportunity
for Change?



Introduction

The fiscal climate for institutions of higher education has changed dramatically in recent decades (Doyle and Delaney 2009, Hossler, et al. 1997, Hu and St. John 2001, Tandberg 2010). Public and private colleges and universities have felt the squeeze of the economic downturn while many public institutions have experienced regular and significant declines in state appropriations (Doyle and Delaney 2009, Hossler, et al. 1997, Tandberg 2010). At the same time, families are being asked to pay more for their students' education (Hossler, et al. 1997). In this climate many colleges and universities, particularly state institutions, have begun to shift from a low-tuition, low-aid model to a high-tuition, high-aid model (Hossler, et al. 1997, Hu and St. John 2001, Monks 2009). This shift means that colleges and universities are awarding more and more aid based on merit rather than need (Heller 2004, Dynarski 2004). There is growing concern amongst educational leaders that these developments are making it more and more difficult for needy students to afford a college education (Singell, Waddell and Curs 2006). What impact do these developments have on the ideals of access and equity upheld by many educators and academic leaders in higher education? Will these rising pressures limit efforts to effectively serve the traditionally underserved? This article explores these issues and provides a critique based on the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu. It concludes with a series of implications for institutional leaders and enrollment managers interested in pursuing goals of social justice and access in an increasingly fiscally-tight environment.

Merit-based Aid and Need-based Aid: A Complex Picture

Any discussion of financial aid must first acknowledge its inherent complexity (Kalsbeek and Hossler 2008, McPherson and Schapiro 2002). Definitions of *merit* and *need*, central concepts for financial aid and enrollment management, have become increasingly blurry (Baum 2004). Even as merit has come to denote any number of special attributes that may be deserving of financial awards, knee-jerk or simplistic reactions to such uses must be held in check. As Kalsbeek and Hossler (2008) note, enrollment management goals are such that institutions cannot lump all merit-based aid together, as if it were all of the same type or driven by the same purposes. The reality is that institutions will have various enrollment goals that require a variety of methods to reach them.

Likewise, the concept of need also requires careful consideration. While it's true that institutions use need analysis systems based on federal and College Board methodologies in order to determine a family's expected financial contribution, Baum (2004) notes that these methodologies contain widely-recognized limitations, making judgments about need always a subjective activity. As Kalsbeek and Hossler (2008) note, defining and determining need is not a straight-forward procedure. In the world of financial aid, simplistic answers are quite likely the wrong ones.

Some argue that the increased use of merit-based financial aid drains resources from those students who most need them (Heller 2004). Research suggests that merit-based aid programs award aid disproportionately to affluent, white students



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who would have attended college even without financial assistance (Dynarski 2004, Heller 2002). In essence the increased focus on merit-based aid programs since the 1990s robs Peter to pay Paul.

However, others do not find a necessary conflict between merit-based and need-based aid (Henry 2002, Longanecker 2002). Longanecker (2002) argues that merit-based aid programs do not necessarily have detrimental effects on need-based programs. In fact, he writes that the fundamental problem surrounding the current debate between the two is due in part to an error of analysis. Comparing merit-aid programs to need-based programs is like comparing apples to oranges; they are different kinds of aid policies driven by different sets of purposes.

The debate about financial aid—and the environment in which it is taking place—is rife with complexity and a critical lack of clarity (Kalsbeek and Hossler 2008). Although research on merit-based aid suggests a mixed score card, with academics arguing both for and against its use (Doyle Delaney and Naughton 2004, Heller 2002 and 2004, Henry 2002, Longanecker 2002, Singell and Stone 2002), the primary concern for the enrollment manager is to seek a solution characterized by wise financial behavior, as well as a focus on the ideals of higher education, such as access and equity to traditionally underserved student populations. In today's highly competitive higher education marketplace, in which students and their families have become consumers shopping for the best product money can buy (Ehrenberg 2003) and institutional rankings are perceived to shape admission and enrollment policies, the use of merit-based scholarships appears inescapably necessary.

However, there remains cause for concern. What will be the outcome if the growing use of merit-based aid is awarded disproportionately to beneficiaries of much privilege, as research suggests (Doyle, Del-

aney and Naughton 2004, Heller 2002 and 2004, Singell and Stone 2002)? Will financial aid decisions influenced by market-oriented perspectives simply perpetuate the disadvantaged position of those who have been historically underserved by and underrepresented in American higher education institutions? Might this policy shift reinforce the exclusion of these populations from opportunities to gain the capital that is deemed most valuable by the dominant strata of society which, in America, has historically been composed of affluent, educated, European decents? Institutions cannot find themselves complicit in reproducing the historical and contemporary unequal distribution of power and resources in society. They must be agents of change.

Financial Aid Through a Bourdieu-ian Lens: An Unequal Distribution

A critical sociological perspective suggests a way forward in this difficult milieu. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu worked to theorize the differential distribution and reproduction of power in society (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In his conceptualization, the accumulation of power by the individual depends on the accumulation of certain types of capital—economic, cultural and social—which plays a central role in this distributive process (Bourdieu 1986). However, an individual's efforts to acquire this capital do not occur on an even playing field. To explain this, Bourdieu argued that the objective structures of the social world influence the individual through the *habitus*, a set of dispositions acquired through socialization processes and which cause the individual—most often in unconscious ways—to take certain decisions and to react to events in certain ways (Bourdieu 1991, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Thompson 1991, Webb 2005). Because the external social world is shaped by the kinds of capital considered most powerful and legitimate by the dominant strata of society, the habitus will constrain the individual to a limited range of choices or “reachable social destinations” (Karen 2002, p. 194) based on its place in and interactions with the surrounding

social environment. In this way, the objective realities of the social world are internalized into the subjective reality of the individual and together work to reproduce the established power structures of society.

This reading paints a particularly dire picture; those who already possess power use social and educational systems to gain even more power, while those without are prevented from acquiring similar types of capital and of power. They are prevented from attaining the privileges that the accrual of certain types of capital might provide in American society. Moreover, because those presently in power are the ones who decide, however arbitrarily, those types of capital that are legitimately valued and of highest value and those that are not, there appears to be little hope for change.

Bourdieu's Game: A Field of Struggle and the Possibility for Change

However, in Bourdieu's theory (1986) education has the potential to act as a subversive force in the social world. It has the capacity to upset the status quo and to disrupt the perpetuation of a differential distribution of power, to begin the necessary transformation and leveling of an uneven playing field.

Bourdieu likened his notion of the social field to a game in which exist certain tacit rules and values of speech and behavior (1992). Players take part in the game to the extent that they

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are convinced of the importance of the game and that its stakes are worth pursuing. A particular game and its stakes, in turn, shape the kinds of capital that are considered legitimate and desirable. This valuation, however, is not static; gaps and asymmetries may appear in the complex interplay of social dynamics. Here emerges "...a space of potential and active forces," which means that "...the field is also a *field of struggles* aimed at

preserving or transforming the configuration of these forces" (1992, p. 101, original emphasis). There emerges the possibility for a transformation of the field to take place. Bourdieu explained, "...players can play to increase or to conserve their capital ...in conformity with the tacit rules of the game and the prerequisites of the reproduction of the game and its stakes; but they can also get in to transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game" (1992, p. 99). Disjunctures in the field open up possibilities for the rules of play to be transformed. Given the value of higher education in this country, the ways that financial aid are put to use can either encourage these kinds of possibilities or shut them down.

Furthermore, not only is a postsecondary degree a highly valued commodity in society; according to Bourdieu, it also acts as a form of institutionalized cultural capital. Its acquisition forces others in society to recognize its meaning and value, thereby providing its bearer with new possibilities for movement within the social order (Bourdieu 1986). A college degree, in this way, can provide those on the edges of the field with valuable types of capital and and open up greater possibilities for agency within the wider, objective social world (Webb 2005).

Based on a Bourdieu-ian perspective, the means to "even the playing field" for the underprivileged and underserved are two-pronged; providing more educational opportunities enables the

acquisition of capital that is highly valued by society-at-large, and then to enable these recognized individuals to reshape how forms of capital are perceived and utilized in society. Transformation to a more equitable society becomes possible.

Some have argued that merit-based financial aid favors the affluent, majority populations, many of whom would have attended



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college anyway and received the valuable benefits or capital of doing so (Dynarski 2004, Heller 2004, Hossler 2004, Singell and Stone 2002). Is this an accident? Or is this a sign confirming the kind of power distribution and reproduction in society that Bourdieu described? If Bourdieu is correct, that those who possess the greatest amounts of power will seek always to maintain it while all others may never have the opportunity to know anything different, then the use of merit-based financial aid may be a more slippery slope than it first appears. In this reading, merit-based aid policies may be tied to the perpetuation of social and educational inequality in the United States. Therefore, their use and impact—on individuals, institutions, even entire populations—must be given special care.

Implications

Implications for practice, policy and research can be drawn from the preceding discussion. First, it is acknowledged that the use of merit-based aid can have legitimate purposes (Kalsbeek and Hossler 2008, Longanecker 2002). However, to maintain a balance between merit and need-based aid, institutions might consider a policy that requires any increase in merit-based funding to be accompanied by a requisite increase in need-based aid. This need not be a simple dollar-for-dollar relationship—some flexibility may need to exist, depending on institutional priorities and contexts—but it is vital that merit-based aid not receive a continually greater proportion of institutional aid to the detriment of funding for need-based programs.

However, as some have pointed out, merit and need are not simply defined (Baum 2004, Kalsbeek and Hossler 2008). Institutions must refine the ways that these concepts are understood and used in their financial aid policies. In a survey of public and private institutions regarding institutional financial aid behavior, Heller (2008) reported that academic merit is the most popular factor in institutional financial aid packaging. If so, is it possible for institutions to use merit-based aid

more creatively? It may be useful for the institution to create a task force dedicated to examining the ways that merit could be defined on a broader basis. In this way merit aid may be distributed based on other factors in addition to the academic, thus possibly including a wider group of recipients. In addition, as Kalsbeek and Hossler (2008) have noted, merit-based funding may be used to bolster other aspects of institutional enrollment goals, such as access and equity. For example, merit-based aid can be used to attract more out-of-state students. The concomitant higher fees that these students pay can be earmarked, in turn, for a variety of institutional goals, including aid programs that target underserved populations.

Lastly, institutional resources can be used to introduce young people in the region to the discourses of academia at an early age and to provide exposure to the kinds of valued capital that may be gained through education. As an example, the music department at a private, liberal arts college in the suburbs of Chicago regularly invites students from local elementary and middle schools to attend day-time concerts specially developed for this audience. These excursions provide neighboring youth—especially the disadvantaged—with opportunities to experience a college campus and to be exposed to the kinds of people they may one day become. In this way these young people are welcomed into a new social space in the field of education where valued capital is on display, thereby providing possibilities for the habitus to form new dispositions that expand the horizon of “reachable social destinations” (Karen 2002, p. 194). Through efforts such as this one, institutions of higher education may have a practical influence on the communities around them and positively influence the life trajectories of youth from racial, ethnic and other backgrounds who have been historically underserved. And once equipped to take part in a given game, these students may take advantage of disjunctive gaps and begin to change the rules of the game, which may result in even

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greater numbers of those most often underserved to be served more adequately and justly.

Conclusion

The complexity surrounding the use of merit and need-based financial aid demands careful thought and wise decision-making about financial aid policies, and calls for further research. These issues have been fruitfully approached from various critical perspectives, such as social critical theories, critical race theory, or feminist perspectives. However, a Bourdieu-ian reading provides a useful set of lens for looking at the historical and contemporary inequalities of American higher education *in relation to* the life trajectory of the individual within it. For example, Walpole (2003) examined whether the habitus and capital of low socioeconomic status (SES) students had an impact on choices in and after college. Her results suggest that low SES students are less involved in extracurricular activities, they work more hours in other jobs, and they spend less time studying in comparison to their high SES peers. The effects hold for post-college as well; low SES students attain a lower income than high SES students, attend graduate school less often, and are less likely to earn a graduate degree. On the other hand, Walpole found that low SES students tended to work with faculty more often than their peers, and those who do become involved in such collaborations have a higher rate of attending graduate school. These findings are encouraging. They suggest that social and academic engagement may enable the acquisition of important kinds of capital, which in turn may encourage students like these to pursue new and previously unconsidered possibilities.

How a student's habitus, capital and SES interact to influence the student's journey from an earlier stage, that is, from high

school into college, deserves further scholarly attention. Future research might involve a qualitative, phenomenological longitudinal study that explores this journey holistically, focusing on the ways in which the student may—or may not—acquire, recognize and use new forms of capital during and after such a



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transition. If where the student comes from is where her habitus will naturally—and unconsciously—direct her aspirations (Karen 2002), then a better understanding of this journey becomes vitally important. Without adequate levels of need-based aid, however, fewer and fewer of the kinds of students who have been traditionally underrepresented and underserved by America's colleges and universities may ever make it to college. A Bourdieu-ian perspective encourages both the researcher and

the enrollment manager to be cognizant not only of the uneven playing field of American higher education (Soares 2007), but also of the other capital deficits these students may have. If the retention and success of students depends on institutional effort (Kuh, et al. 2005), then concentrating on this population, particularly during tight economic times, is a vital necessity.



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