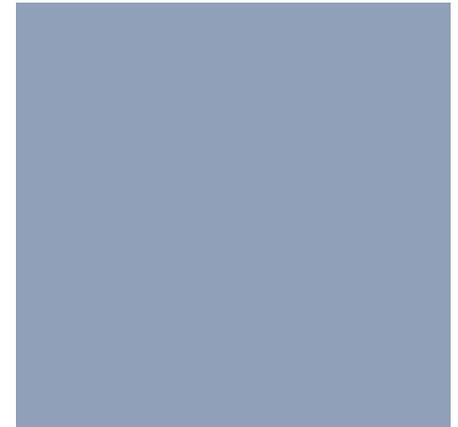




Yes We Must: College Success for All

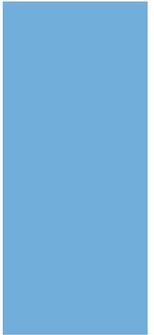


The Context of Poverty for Pathways to College

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High Aspirations, Disappointing Realities



- The vast majority of all young adults aspire to a college degree
- However, while the college landscape has become more open, it has also become more complex, competitive, and risky
- Working-class students make choices in a larger context of social isolation
- While 85 percent of working-class high school students said they wanted to go to college, only 41 percent actually enrolled.
- Eight years after high school graduation, low- and middle-class students were also much less likely to have achieved a bachelor's degree or higher than their high-SES peers (14 and 29 percent v. 60 percent respectively) (National Center for Education Statistics 2015).



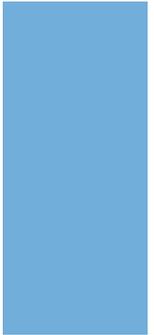
Overview



- Disadvantaged youth believe in higher education as a pathway to upward mobility
- However, every step of the higher education process – from applying to college, choosing a major, paying for it, and transitioning to the labor market – is experienced as a site of bewilderment and betrayal.
- Working-class youth lack the resources, knowledge, and skills to translate their aspirations for higher education into the reality of upward mobility.

+ Data and Methods

- 100 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with men and women from working-class families. “Working class” defined as parents without college degrees.
- Sample was 60% white, 40% black, and split evenly by gender.
- Median age = 27 years.
- Recruited at gas stations, casual dining restaurants, coffee shops, fast food chains, retail chains, daycares, temporary agencies, community and regional colleges, military training sites, and police and fire stations.
- 120 additional interviews across the US with middle and upper class young adults



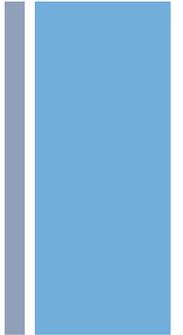
+ Barriers to Enrollment



Hopeful parents

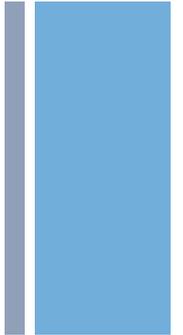
“I was the last class at my school to learn to manufacture tools by hand. Now they use CNC [computer numerical controlled] machine programs, so they just draw the part in the computer and plug it into the machine, and the machine cuts it... I haven't learned to do that, because I was the last class before they implemented that in the program at school, and now if you want to get a job as a machinist without CNC, they want five years experience. My skills are useless.”

+ Financial Constraints



“I am looking for a new place. I don’t have a job. My car is broken. It’s like, what exactly can you do when your car is broken and you have no job, no real source of income, and you are making four or five hundred dollars a month in [military] drills. Where are you going to live, get your car fixed, on five hundred a month? I can’t save making five hundred bucks a month. That just covers my bills. I have no savings to put down first and last on an apartment, no car to get a job. I find myself being like, oh what the hell? Can’t it just be over? Can’t I just go to Iraq right now? Send me two weeks ago so I got a paycheck already!”

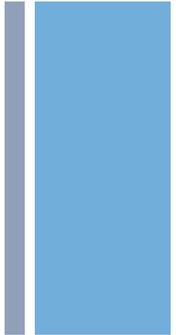
+ “Cheated” by Education



“I knew I was smart and that I wasn’t a straight C student, yet all my teachers, you know we had thirty kids in the class, and the teachers were just too busy...unless you were destructive, you really didn’t get attention. I guess knowing, once I knew that I had ADHD, knowing if somebody had seen it in me earlier, I could have gotten so much further. Now I am medicated, which makes a world of difference. It is just bad. If somebody had just known...*sometimes I feel cheated out of life, I could have been in college by now. I could have had a real live career that is not just a cook.* That sounds terrible.”



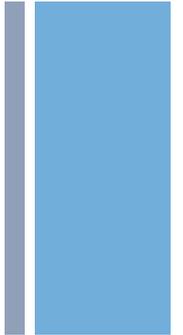
Bureaucratic Bewilderment



- Buying books, completing assignments, communicating with administrators, or filling out financial aid forms confront them as overwhelming obstacles.
- Pupils from working-class backgrounds are less likely than their middle-class counterparts to take a core curriculum in high school, meet readiness standards on college entry exams, or link aspirations to concrete career goals (Klasik, 2014).
- Similarly, working-class parents are less likely to know if they plan to fill out a FAFSA than middle-class parents. These unequal starting points in high school compound into serious liabilities in college.



Powerlessness

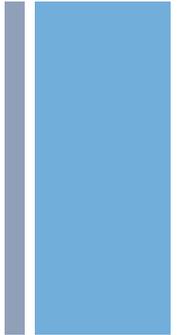


“It was damage to the dorm room and the main hall. Which I don’t know how they blamed me for that, I think just because I was there and they said I did it. So I got it back to twenty dollars and sent it to them, and now they are giving me a new bill for the whole amount again. And I don’t know what happened but it really...I try to call them, and they say, call your Hire One account. So I call that office, and they say, You have an outstanding balance online, so I go online and they say to call the office. Back and forth. Then they say my account has been deleted. So I can’t do anything. I don’t know what to do with them. All I can do is look to the future and hope for the best.”



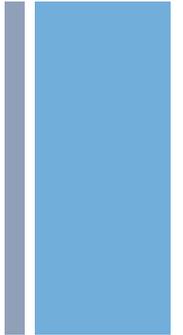
Paying for College

- College signifies a fresh start in life – but the high hopes they attach to college can make them vulnerable to making poor financial decisions.
 - “I didn’t really know much about medical billing and coding. I just decided to go with it just because, um, this doesn’t like cut me, like paying for me and my daughter’s stuff. It barely gets us by. I could never have money for anything. I mean from what the school tells me is that they’re [the medical billing field] always hiring and there’s always somewhere where you can find a job.”
- Some working-class students choose college based on feelings of fitting in
- They are ill-equipped to make cost-benefit calculations about the payoff of college





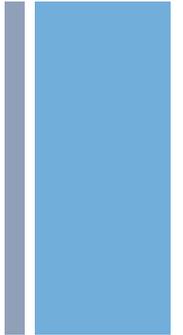
Connecting College to Careers



- Working-class students believe that picking the “right” major is vital to success:
 - “I started with art, but I couldn’t do the assignments the way I wanted to do them, or express them in ways I wanted to express because the ways I wanted to express them apparently were wrong. So I just gave it up. I switched my major to computers. I liked where it was going, but I didn’t like the whole programming aspect. Unfortunately, this community college didn’t offer a... they only offered like a computer programmer kind of SYS admin sort of thing. They didn’t offer anything in the way of PC repair. So I was stuck taking that kind of course, and I really didn’t see where it was going.”



Bewilderment

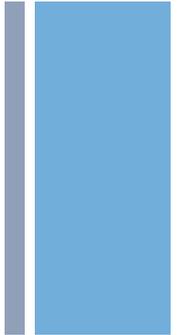


- Upon graduation, they discover that they lack the knowledge, skills, social support, and resources to achieve upward mobility outside the college walls.
- Emotional and financial hardships from home threaten academic achievement
 - “And you know, I was so disillusioned by the end of it, my attitude toward college was like, I just want to get out and get it over with, you know what I mean, and just like, put it behind me, really. I didn’t even walk. I felt like it wasn’t anything to celebrate. I mean I graduated with a degree. *Which ultimately I’m not even sure if that was what I wanted, but there was a point where I was like I have to pick some bullshit I can fly through and just get through. I didn’t find it at all worthwhile.* “

+ Betrayal

“Well, to be honest, *one of the great lies that I was fed was the magnificence of my brilliance.* I feel like, you know I was always straight A’s and honor society and stuff like that. They were just blowing smoke up my ass – the world is at my fingertips, you can rule the world, be whatever you want, all this stuff. When I was fifteen, sixteen, I would not have envisioned the life I am living now. Whatever I imagined, I figured I would wear a suit every day, that I would own things. I don’t own anything. I don’t own a car. If I had a car, I wouldn’t be able to afford my daily life. I’m coasting and cruising and not sure about what I should be doing.”

“...I mean does college really mean anything? These other things, rituals that make you a man, are usually functional, like you learn to hunt because you need to hunt to survive, but for instance college doesn’t necessarily prepare you for anything. Are you a man afterwards?”

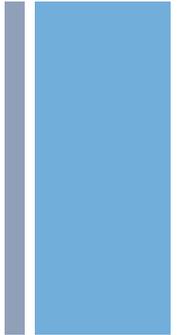


+ Middle-Class Comparisons

- Parents' private resources – exclusive social ties, money, and institutional knowledge – are vital to students' ability to thrive in college and achieve a stable adult life.
- Parents advise their children in how to reduce loan debt and choose majors with direct links to economic demand.
 - “We leveraged for him to accept the scholarship to [the public school]. Now, we told him if he would do that, we would do two things. And one is we would pay for whatever study abroad programs he wanted to participate in throughout. We told him that if he went through and did well in undergraduate, uh, that if he, if he chose to shoot the moon for a graduate degree, we would go ahead, we would help him with that. But I couldn't see, I couldn't see forfeiting this free foundation. Kyle is smarter than I am, and we want to support that. But I wasn't willing to throw us in a blind hole for an undergraduate degree.”



Conclusions



- Broadening access and affordability is at the forefront of policy aimed at upward mobility.
- However, without the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the everyday demands of the educational system – whether interacting with teachers and principals, choosing a major, passing exams, or surmounting learning disabilities – working-class youth cannot rely on education as a pathway to upward mobility.
- Failing to create opportunity within schools will only serve to heighten working-class young adults feelings of distrust, isolation, and betrayal.