Reviews

Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality
Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton

Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education
Jenny M. Stuber

Going North, Thinking West: The Intersections of Social Class, Critical Thinking, and Politicized Writing Instruction
Irvin Peckham

Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education
Mike Rose

Editor’s note: Given the national attention that continues to focus on class in higher education and in the US, I invited four scholars to share with us their views of four books considering the issue of class, two from the higher education literature and two from the Rhetoric and Composition literature: Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton’s Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality; Jenny Stuber’s Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter

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The Persistence and Complications of Class

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Issues of class, both social and economic, are addressed directly in the four books I was asked to review. Scholarly conversation around issues of class is not new, as there have been nearly constant discussions in the field of composition looking at class as a context for what happens to students in higher education and the ways in which class is replicated as a result of higher education. What is different about these four books, and makes them worth taking the time to not only glance through but read and consider, is that through methodologies such as ethnographies and personal reflection, these scholars begin to tease out more nuanced discussions of class. The site for study is more specific, with a closer look at individual students, programs, and even a world rarely studied, non-traditional students in community colleges. These perspectives reveal distinct biases, and display built-in structural concerns for students who have come to higher education without the advantages of upper middle class or upper class orientations to college. These works assert poor and working class students have a disadvantage in cash flow, in perspective of their options within higher education, and in their expectations for an education. The complications of a world which both replicates the current class system and provides possibilities for disrupting that same system are explored. Both theoretical and practical, these authors delve into the complicated gap between what is expected or believed about higher education and the often inscrutable reality for students entering colleges and universities in the United States.

Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education by Jenny M. Stuber

From the opening of Chapter 1, Stuber begins exploring what is clearly evident, even in the fliers posted around Benton College’s campus; “my initial impression was that its students were at least as invested in the social side of college life as they were in the academic side” (2). From here on through her text, she
argues that while higher education is a site of replication for the social and economic norm, she problematized that initial statement by observing higher education provides “opportunities for the contestation of class inequities” (4). Her research methodology includes explorations of these questions on two distinct campuses, one a small (2,300 students), liberal arts private college and the other a big (30,000 undergraduates) state university (18–19). Stuber followed 61 students, 30 from Benton and 31 from Big State University. Stuber is careful to explain her methodology, and presents her concerns in developing ethnographic research that will reveal, yet avoid difficulties of bias, problematic selection of informants, and the variation in data collection caused by her own ease in talking with some students while finding a connection with others more difficult to establish.

What makes this study a step outside those which have preceded it, at least for me, was two-fold. First, Stuber is able to create a more carefully nuanced interpretation of students’ social class of origins and how that plays into and at times against the expectations they have for themselves and the campus lives they develop. Secondly, she ends her book with an interesting chapter entitled: “Lessons Learned: Theoretical and Practical Conclusions” (163). While the theoretical discussion does agree with the place of higher education as a replicating agency, Stuber moves beyond this and attempts to make a real world set of changes to the way information is provided to all students, but especially to working class students. She suggests these adjustments would enable working class students to visualize the importance of the social capital they build in experiences such as study abroad and extra-curricular activities. The reality of working students’ living situations, often off campus for the first year (171) becomes less of a block to students’ engagement, and more of a fascinating challenge which administrators and program directors have the ability to bridge by leveraging specific strategies. Stuber provides examples of how these adjustments might be conceived and implemented.

**Going North, Thinking West: The Intersections of Social Class, Critical Thinking, and Politicized Writing Instruction by Irvin Peckham**

Peckham’s book begins with a somewhat uncomfortable apology. While he clearly situates himself in the working class, his work as a compositionist at a doctoral granting university brings strong tensions to the foreground. How can he be working class and a member of the professoriate? This fracture point is at the heart of the struggle outlined in his book. His main concern throughout
is “how progressive writing teachers like myself maintain social class structures while we think we are working against them” (11). Class is central to his concerns and is the unavoidable conversation. If working class is to be reacted against, or abandoned, then how can he claim his working class history and elevate similar students without either causing them to leave their working class roots, as he did, or by replicating the structure of the university and minimizing their value, blocking them from the growth he espouses to support? This is a hard question, and not a book for the faint of heart. It is filled with the flaws and concerns of an unanswered question. Just identifying the paradox of the individual professor’s goals for students and the outcomes of the work as they play out in the university setting is a difficult question to see, let alone to outline and examine carefully. Peckham’s position as a student starting without class privilege gives him a vantage point that makes the concern visible, but is also the reason his concerns are so fraught with half statement, partial understanding, and portions of answers. Peckham’s book opens up the question, and that is a major contribution to the larger discussion in itself. Class as an overlay of how writing teachers (notice, he uses the less elevated term teacher, rather than instructor or professor), and Peckham’s book attempts to tease out the difficulty of using language, which is filled with social and economic codes and class markers, to teach language. He outlines intersections between students’ right to their own language and the cost of using that language in an academic world. He captures the problematic structure of teaching and using critical thinking, a rhetorical mode, as an ontological term and the friction caused by advocating with a class bias or hierarchical structure deeply embedded in the lives of all participants in the discussion, faculty and students alike. He asserts various pedagogies can be unproductive, and that the high status of cultural studies within composition complicates these concerns at best.

In what was the most interesting chapter for me, he discusses dominant approaches to teaching writing, instrumentalism vs. transformationalism (112). He speaks directly to a powerful ideological split within the larger field, and how this split reflects the class distinctions he has grappled with throughout the text. What does it mean for those who work in the field if instrumentalism is connected with lower value in the hierarchy and lower social/economic class values? And in reverse, how does this dichotomy play out in what is taught, who is teaching, and what the field holds up as exemplary or important work? What are the implications if compositionists set out to work against the larger social hierarchy but replicate a mirrored world within their own field? Again,
Peckham does not provide easy answers, but instead gives the reader an opportunity to consider what might not have been visible or questioned in the larger field in just this way with any frequency.

**Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality** by Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton

This ethnographic study follows 53 women who lived on the same residence hall floor in 2004–05 at a public research university in the Midwest. Armstrong and Hamilton’s study continued for five years, with five annual interviews each year, capturing the students’ experiences through the university on into their first year post-university in the workforce. In the best tradition of ethnographic research, the researchers lived on that same floor as their study members for the 2004–05 academic year, getting to know the women through both observation and interaction. Although this has obvious dangers for bias, it seems that the researchers have carefully compiled and recorded their information. Additionally, they have a powerfully in-depth understanding of the opportunities, resources, and choices these women made. Anderson and Hamilton’s conceit of a “pathway” provides a useful way to manage the analysis of what happens for and by each of the women in the study. Also adding layers of meaning were discussions of the class background for each of the women on the floor, along with the analysis of interactions between the women and how it was reflected in their desire and ability to connect with each other and with the resources available to them while on campus.

Carefully researched background materials help set the context of the location and the possible paths available or not available. It is interesting to note that Armstrong and Hamilton chose to locate their study at a large public research university precisely because it “offered stepping-stones for many low-income, immigrant, and minority individuals” (5). They also include a chapter that explores the complications of Greek life and the residential dormitories on the “party pathway.”

The use of ethnographic research allowed for extensive inclusion of the statements of the women studied. Their voices, though selectively included, were varied, descriptive and fascinating. Because ethnographic methods were employed, additional layers of information around the women’s social lives, sexual and romantic relationships, work and home expectations are a part of the analysis. Class is not an isolated feature in these women’s lives, and the authors made significant progress in attempting to find the interconnections within these students’ experiences at the university.
The book includes a nuanced discussion of the reproduction of privilege, the factors that have powerful influences on how these women see themselves and others around them, and how this is reflected in identifiable and replicated patterns, even in a relatively small number of subjects. There is also a discussion of gender and power and how these women cast themselves and are cast by others into particular roles that have a direct impact on their eventual trajectory. The authors suggest a number of specific moves to break down the party pathway and to create institutional support for a greater diversity of female students to experience upward mobility while at Midwestern University. Anderson and Hamilton's work demonstrates for working class women in their study, academic success was more likely for students who transferred to regional campuses with more students of lower economic class and social status. There is a side commentary worth considering that develops at the end of their analysis about the stratification of higher education, with community colleges and online courses serving the mass of students, and only a privileged few having a chance to succeed or even enter the world of direct instruction by the best faculty at private Ivy League schools.

Paying for the Party illustrates the complications faced not only by the women studied, but by the world of higher education. What should a college education consist of, in addition to specific course work? And to what end does and should the larger community of taxpayers engage in providing those other experiences for the benefit of the society as a whole?

Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education
by Mike Rose
Rose's book illuminates the issues of class in a way that is markedly different than the other three works included in this review. He asserts "the stories in this book affirm the transformational potential of the college classroom, the occupational workshop, the tutoring center, the mentoring relationship" (xii). While the danger here is that Rose will sing praises exclusively, I was fascinated to see he is open about the problems inherent in the community college structure, including: the push-pull between basic skills programs, vocational programs and academic transfer programs; the powerfully chaotic lives of numerous students; chronic underfunding both of the institutions and of individual students; and a false hierarchy within higher education that replicates these challenges.

Using student voices, supported by a well-constructed context of the larger issues with reliable data and information, Rose highlights the community colleges and basic skills programs as locations for students to alter their lives, to
reach for goals they didn't even know existed when they began their educational journey. He reminds all of us that education brings richness to individual lives that cannot, and perhaps should not be measured by completed certificates and programs. The power and elegance of higher education is brought to the surface through the language of the students he interacts with and shares. The difficulty of the task set for community colleges and for the students who move through them is delineated in order to better understand how success both is and perhaps should be defined.

The fault of the book, and it is minor, is that Rose flattens all community colleges into the urban community college. There are distinctions between these colleges when they are located in rural and suburban areas, also when they are near or far from transfer institutions and major industries, which Rose does not identify. This concern is clearest in his suggestions for change in Chapter 6: Improving the People's College, which is filled with especially useful ideas on a large or urban campus. However, I was delighted to see a thoughtful consideration by an author who has spent time on these campuses, in these classrooms, in deep conversation with these students. Rose's perspective as a person who is directly involved, not just looking at statistics and financial spreadsheets from afar, is informative and will hopefully bring other scholars into a continued conversation. Ultimately, Rose's argument has power and meaning because he connects his readers with students who have altered their lives in ways that benefit themselves and strengthens the communities with which they engage.

The Unseen Weight of Class

Bradley Dilger
Western Illinois University

The people here are more like, I don’t want to say sophisticated, but different than me. They seem more cultured. . . . Sometimes I feel like I don’t measure up.
Patty, qtd. in Jenny M. Stuber

The ones who make rude or, like, snide remarks, you can tell whether they’re sophisticated or whether they’re a little more, not necessarily back country, but, like, rural, I guess.
Austin, qtd. in Jenny M. Stuber
To open this review of four very interesting and provocative books about the role of socioeconomic class in higher education, I give voice to two participants from Jenny M. Stuber's *Inside the College Gates*. Both Patty, a first-generation, middle-class student, and Austin, an upper-middle-class New Yorker, choose the shorthand *sophisticated for upper class*. As Stuber and the other writers I discuss here point out repeatedly, this pattern generalizes broadly: American higher education is uncomfortable talking about class. Like Patty or Austin, we use a variety of euphemisms or substitutions: *sophisticated, rural, cute, streetwise*. Or we simply avoid the subject, as Irvin Peckham explains as he opens *Going North, Thinking West*, showing this bracketing in both broader culture and our discipline of writing studies (16–18). Perhaps we discuss other markers of socioeconomic capital, like race or gender; perhaps not. Designing surveys, we may replace questions about income with parents' education, if we include them at all, or allow participants to skip questions about class or socioeconomic status. Certainly, this quietness holds true at my institution, a regional state comprehensive university that has historically served a large number of under-prepared students, many of them working class or lower middle class. We rarely talk about class, though we feel its weight all the time, in the regular stutterings of long-neglected institutional infrastructure, but more painfully in the realities of students who come to class without books, decline participation in clubs because they have to work, or simply disappear after running out of money. And though our state is beset by a financial crisis that dominated presentations at our annual faculty assembly and continues to shape our campus in many ways, that story has not been told in terms of class. Hence my pleasure considering the research represented in these four books and sharing it here. Favoring sampling over coverage, I'll truncate my summaries of the books in order to examine some of their commonalities and implications with greater depth.

Stuber's book presents the results of an empirical study that compares sixty-one full-time, traditional-age students at two midwestern institutions, one a flagship "Big State" university and the other, "Benton," a small liberal arts college. Through a series of interviews with these students, bolstered by some demographic data and interviews with administrators in student services at both institutions, *Inside* documents the depth and breadth of the differences between institutions as well as between students of different classes. Leaning heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of capital, Stuber focuses on "social and extracurricular realms," given that most students spend far less time in classes and doing homework than they do socializing, participating in clubs...
and organizations, or, for some, working. For example, participants discuss the selection of dormitories before and during orientation, fall activities fairs that showcase the extracurriculum, and January term study-abroad programs or internships. Repeatedly, Stuber shows how upper-class students exchange social and economic capital in these realms, often without realizing it, calling upon their broad base of resources to achieve the rich educational experience promised at matriculation. In contrast, working-class students are far less successful. They start out with less and make less of what they have.

Two findings merit special attention. First, Stuber finds that working-class students are far less likely to engage student organizations because they lack time, given they are more likely to work (66), and have fewer social connections to help them discover and join relevant clubs (78). However, working-class students often prefer “the virtues of good grades and a strong work ethic” to the “résumé building culture” of the extracurriculum (73). As Tiffany remarked, “I don’t really see how being in all these clubs and stuff [will matter]. . . . I’m someone who’s grounded and understands the importance of being at work every day” (74). In our writing transfer research, Neil Baird and I identify similar tendencies in first-generation students, a counterproductive “good student” subjectivity: the drive to get A grades and work efficiently, avoiding the messy, difficult, hard work of taking up a disciplinary identity.

Second, a pair of working-class students stand out in Stuber’s account for their success—rare across the four books. Chris and Ty, both first-generation white students who identify with African American music and culture, were selected for a federally funded TRIO program Stuber nicknames “Aspire.” Conditionally admitted, they matriculated in summer, taking three courses and learning their way around the university. The social bonds they build playing basketball with other students helped them navigate the university come fall, when a crush of upper- and upper-middle-class students flood Big State. Aspire helped Chris and Ty assert their place on campus, not only through socialization but also in the classroom. As Chris got to know his African American literature professor, he read a book for the first time in his life. Aspire “equipped him with a vocabulary and a framework for understanding his own experiences” (111) and, I would add, explaining them in disciplinary languages. Unfortunately, most of Stuber’s participants lack this support and fare less well—socially and in the classroom, too. (I wonder if this program still exists today, nearly ten years of budget cuts after Stuber’s data collection took place.)

Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton’s *Paying for the Party* is also an empirical study of full-time, traditional-age students at a midwestern...
school, and like Stuber’s book, it shows how class differences impact the social, with cascading impacts that often prevent successes in other areas. Their five-year ethnographic study began with a year of observation facilitated by research team members living in a women’s dormitory on the campus of the public research university and then following participants through regular interviews and field observations. Impressive in the richness of its data, the longitudinal design of Armstrong and Hamilton’s study allows us to learn what happens after college to the forty-seven women with whom they lived for a year. As Stuber’s work suggests, the results aren’t pretty; after four or five years of school, many working-class or lower-class women find themselves in jobs that they could have taken without college degrees—and for many, without the accompanying debt (212–14).

Using a highway analogy, Armstrong and Hamilton suggest that the social, cultural, and even geographical structure of the research university they study creates a “party pathway” facilitated by institutional decision making on a variety of levels:

the party pathway is a main artery through the university, much like a well-paved, eight-lane highway directing traffic into a major city: on-ramps are numerous and well-marked, and avoiding it completely requires intent, effort, and intricate knowledge of alternative routes…. The professional pathway—catering as it does to another wealthy (but difficult to secure) set of clientele—still exists, but it is narrow, harder to spot, and fast moving, like an express lane where cars continually pick up speed. Those who got on the highway early are heavily advantaged, although they may just be going with the flow…. The mobility pathway suffers the most; over time, neglect and lack of support stymie development and lead to disrepair. This pathway is like a side road riddled with potholes and major obstacles; often it simply goes nowhere (21–22).

Armstrong and Hamilton divide their participants based on their pathways, social class, and success in achieving the goals inscribed by them. “Socialites” and “wannabes” choose the party pathway’s Greek life and easy majors in order to facilitate the network building necessary for its outcome—the favor of upper-class men and placement in a “glamour” job like public relations or media. Those who find and succeed on the professional pathway are “achievers”; those who fail are “underachievers.” “Strivers” choose the mobility pathway but seldom find success, as the road analogy predicts. Not surprisingly, class lines mark these divisions. All of the upper-class women in the study find the party pathway and high-status jobs after graduation (120). Working-class women are relegated to failure on the mobility pathway.
The picture Armstrong and Hamilton coolly paint is gruesome, suggesting that universities are content to take money from/with the party pathway’s wealthy students (later the rich donors who mingle with socialites at weekend tailgates) despite failing to help lower-income students achieve. A host of less obvious procedures raise questions, such as the gap between the intent of certain policies and their realization. For example, by requiring students to live in dormitories with strict rules about alcohol, colleges may actually encourage partying by forcing it off-campus where it’s out of their purview (53–54). These are not necessarily new concerns, but Armstrong and Hamilton make troubling connections between smaller issues and a general compromise of college’s mission of facilitating upward mobility.

Of the four books here, Irvin Peckham’s *Going North, Thinking West* takes the most strident, energetic tone and is most squarely at home in writing studies. Covering a tremendous amount of ground, Peckham reviews a diversity of scholarship focusing on teaching writing. His review of literature on social class is not as in-depth as Stuber’s but is more directly connected to our field via a focus on language and literacy. Peckham achieves this through a reading of Basil Bernstein’s linguistic codes, followed by careful analysis of the commonplaces of composition in terms of class. Starting from Lynn Bloom’s “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise”—clearly problematic in his eyes—Peckham moves through language, critical thinking, and argument and then into in-depth analysis of pedagogies shaped around “the social strand of critical thinking” often the critical pedagogies of James Berlin, Paulo Freire, and those influenced by them.

Peckham chronicles a diverse array of well-intentioned attempts to show “the social structures that naturalize the exploitation and oppression of dominated social groups” and “promote an egalitarian social structure, concern for our environment, a global consciousness,” among other things (61, 91–92). Unfortunately, for Peckham, too many attempts condescend to or alienate the very populations they are intended to benefit. Too often, critical pedagogies reproduce the very structures they are intended to disrupt—the teacher’s authority and the authority and power of oppressive class systems—shifting only the content. Instead of writing about vampires, common social problems, or summer vacation, composition students learn to “deconstruct hegemony,” or at least they learn to parrot similar language. This is not just a matter of easily dismissed poor teaching, perhaps by overmatched graduate students teaching for the first time, as in the extreme example Peckham presents via Jeff Smith (109). Peckham is at his best when he rereads scholarship that examines stu-
dent writing. For example, reviewing Russel Durst’s *Collision Course*, Peckham suggests Louise is not resistant politically, as Durst claims, but is simply struggling to adopt language, argumentative structures, and content unfamiliar to a working-class student—indeed, contrary to her values. *Going North* is, then, a reminder that despite best intentions, trying to do something about class may cause more harm than good.

Lastly, Mike Rose’s *Back to School* adopts a less scholarly approach. It is still academically structured—chapters usually begin with careful presentation of evidence or relevant literature and then work up to more pragmatic conclusions or implications—but reference to outside work is much more selective and quietly added as a postscript. Like Peckham, Rose builds off a lifetime of work in the field, rather than highlighting a particular study. And as in his other work, Rose wastes little time getting to the point. Illustrating his arguments with narratives of Jesus, Jeremy, Henry, Maria, Elias, Cynthia, Bobby, and other working-class and lower-class adult students and their teachers, Rose calls for re-establishing the value of education as a vehicle for those who need a “second chance,” for whatever reason.

Rose argues that genuine second chances—never as strong as perhaps they should be—have eroded for several reasons: the persistence of American mythologies that suggest autonomous success is possible (well documented by Rose in his introduction); a lack of institutions that give adults the ability to find direction and develop an educational path that fits their goals and interests; continued lack of respect and funding for vocational programs, community colleges, and other institutions we might call the lower class of higher education; poor approaches to remedial education, perhaps worsening as Bill Gates and other foundations suggest a back-to-basics and skill-and-drill curriculum. In his conclusion, Rose provides a list of ways to build an “educational safety net” (188), some based on shifts in thinking and curriculum, some based on increased funding for the institutions that typically serve working-class or lower-class Americans. Fitting the optimism that separates him from the rest of the books summarized here, Rose ends with a success story: walking across campus on a sunny day, he converses with Sam, a student who began in a welding program but is now tutoring other students as he finishes his associate degree.

Reading across these four books confirms the importance of what might be called the empirical turn in writing studies: our field’s recognition of the value of writing with data. I mark this turn with the increased presence of empirical
work in this journal and at NCTE conferences, by financial support from CCCC through its Research Initiative, and with the renaissance of institutions like the Dartmouth Seminar in Composition Research. Our field has a long tradition of qualitative research that has done much to help us trace the complexities inherent in writing and here, in class. Peckham’s careful rereadings of the writing analyzed by other scholars, Stuber’s comparative work, and Armstrong and Hamilton’s impressive study obviously fit this mold. But it is Rose who puts it best by demonstrating the act of seeing complexity where others do not—in the hidden intellectual strength of a welder, say—and then searching for ways to bring those findings forward more effectively. “What we lack in the reports,” he writes, “is the blending of the statistical table with the portrait of a life” (53). Writing researchers can do more to make their work visible to audiences outside of our field, as Rose has done in other writings. As he points out, our empirical scholarship is often ignored because it is not experimental, controlled, or randomized. While none of the work here fits that mold, we can move in that direction by embracing writing with data, carefully coding qualitative data and considering multivariate analytical methods like moderation and mediation that represent, rather than diminish, our complexities. Rose also notes that institutional measurements can misidentify success as failure; for example, a student who, after taking to a vocational education program, decides to drop out and enlist in the navy, where the GI Bill will allow him to attend college (13). By becoming more adept at writing with data, we position our field to more effectively argue for future measurements that move students like this one Rose identifies out of the “Failure” column.

Several strong possibilities emerge for that future, both in scholarship and institutional assessment. We need to continue to diversify the types of institutions we study. Armstrong and Hamilton note that education research too often focuses on elite colleges, what Steven Brint calls “Ivy islands,” (qtd. on 5), and call for more research sited at public universities. I agree, as they argue, that turning to the public research university shines a light on complexities not found at Harvard or Stuber’s “Benton College.” But community colleges and state comprehensive universities like mine present even more diversity and complexity, with complications both added and made more sinister by our extremely limited resources. As Rose suggests, “our nation’s economic and civic future lies more in the health of these institutions” than in the U.S. News top fifty schools (8). The differences are simply too great. So I question Armstrong and Hamilton’s confidence that “our women’s stories would have been similar at
other residential four-year institutions with a robust party pathway” (267–68).
I do not doubt a party pathway exists at my institution. But I can’t help but
think its character is radically different since we simply don’t have thousands
of well-off parents paying for the party on behalf of their children. Indeed,
many of our students are parents themselves. I wonder what our mobility and
professional pathways look like? Do they serve those who hit the books only
after putting the kids to bed? Or graduate students commuting in for night
classes, hoping for a salary bump? Or “2+2” transfer students navigating the
academic cultures of community colleges and state universities? Studies that
target these populations, not only the full-time, traditional-age, residential
students considered here, could benefit these populations immensely.

We also need to ask if any of these institutions are a good match for stu-
dents struggling to realize the intellectual engagement necessary for taking on
disciplinary identities. With care and respect, after Rose, we need to reframe
the assumption “Everyone should go to college” to consider alternative paths
with lower cost—and lower costs of failure. Again, thinking of my own institu-
tion, I shudder to think of the many working-class and lower-class students
who annually leave the university after a year with nothing to show for it but
debt. Or Armstrong and Hamilton’s “strivers,” who return home, perhaps with
degree in hand, perhaps not, to take menial jobs alongside their boyfriends and
high school buddies. Until we can better serve these populations, we might be
better off doing them no harm. At the very least, we should be asking which
institution is right for a given student at a given time. Less gloomily, I note that
four of the five “strivers” in Party who find an upwardly mobile track do so by
transferring to regional state universities that were closer to home, had lower
costs, and lacked Greek-fueled party pathways (176–80). Perhaps at the state
level more attention can be paid to the issues of fit that mark Stuber’s research
design and can be read in all of the books assembled here.

That assumes, of course, that we share Rose’s optimism and believe our
work has any measurable positive impact at all. Paying for the Party suggests,
at least implicitly, that college really has little to do with after-college em-
ployment. Upper-class “socialites” get jobs largely or wholly because of their
parents’ social networks, and working-class “underachievers” return home and
take jobs that didn’t require a college degree in the first place. This is not to
say we should be surprised that four books about social class suggest higher
education is constrained by the operation of class! Rather, as in Stuber’s con-
cluding implications, it’s the depth of constraints, their interconnectedness,
and persistence that should worry us. The impacts of class reach far further into our workplaces than admissions and financial aid. As Armstrong and Hamilton assert, this persistence cuts deep into the self-selection and agency at the heart of the contemporary image of higher education. We imagine, and our color brochures picture, a marketplace of finding oneself: guided by advisers and peers, students selecting dorms, majors, classes, social lives, student organizations, and employment to facilitate their long-term goals. But class pressures this “self-selection,” suggesting instead that more powerful “university infrastructure and student peer cultures play a role in sorting students” (22). For the students in all of these books, small differences add up to huge impacts: information about student life on campus, an English professor’s approach to writing, the strength and depth of social networks, the ability to get pizza with some new faces as opposed to making a PB&J in the dorm alone. The positive agency we attribute to ourselves and our institutions may, in fact, be outclassed by the mechanisms of social class.

Finally, if asked to select a patron saint for these four books, it would very likely be Pierre Bourdieu. Writing scholars have turned to his ideas for quite some time, and the success of the work allied here suggests many of us would benefit from a closer look. We would be wise to do so keeping in mind Peckham’s warning that paying attention to class may suggest pathways far different from those we are used to following as we walk around our campuses.

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**When Institutions and Education Reproduce Social Class Inequities: What Else Factors In? Or, the Problem of Stinky Skin**

*Sue Hum*

University of Texas, San Antonio

I am standing in a grocery isle when my cell phone rings. It is the director of my children’s (very expensive, private Montessori) school. She tells me that she is making a “sad” phone call, her way of preparing me for bad news. “What has he done now?” I wonder of my cheeky, boundary-testing son. The phone call, it
turns out, concerns my three-year-old daughter. It seems, the director explains gingerly, that my daughter has told her best friend and regular afternoon playmate, another three-year-old girl, that “her skin is stinky.” No one witnessed this unfortunate statement since the children were playing at the other end of the school yard. The friend immediately repeated those offending words to the recess teacher. My daughter, who ran after her friend, admitted freely to that same teacher that she did indeed use those words.

A tempest ensued. Perceived as a race-related problem—the friend’s skin resembles rich chocolate while my daughter inherited her father’s light cream complexion, rather than my olive Asian skin tones—this incident jump-started the institutional procedures deemed necessary to eradicate incipient racism from a school environment. The director calls both sets of parents to inform them of the incident. She meets with both sets of parents separately several times. The parents meet with each other. Many long conversations between parents occur in the school parking lot. We invite the friend and her parents over for dinner. Numerous emails and texts are exchanged between the mothers. Book lists and resources are shared. Meanwhile, code words, metaphors, and analogies are used to discuss the “incident” with the school children. New, Montessori-approved classroom materials are ordered, and a lesson plan is developed to emphasize friendship, tolerance, and the necessity of diversity (without explicitly naming race, class, or gender). The director writes a letter absolving my daughter of any wrongdoing in order to reassure my worried spouse that she will not be expelled for what is perceived, at best, as a racialized statement and, at worst, as a racist slur. Institutional, social, and personal solutions, both long- and short-term, are instituted after extended meetings with administrators and teachers to redress this race-related problem. Fast forward six months to a particularly humid spring day in San Antonio. It is Fitness Friday, and both children are out on the playground when I arrive to take my daughter home. Her cheeks are red, her hair and clothes damp with sweat from exercise and physical activity. She runs up to meet me; thrusting her arm to my nose, she announces, “Mommy, my skin is stinky.”

I offer this incident and the strategic responses of parents, administrators, and teachers to highlight the intersection of class and other formative factors. Lurking within that problem naming and problem solving of the “stinky skin” issue is the silent partnership of race, class, and gender, undergirded by a middle-class anxiety and liberal worldview. These rapid, sustained, and systematic institutional responses, in which the parents faithfully participated,
foster what sociologist Annette Lareau in *Unequal Childhoods* calls “concerted cultivation,” a term she uses to describe how the middle class actively develops their child’s cultural, social, intellectual, and physical repertoire through private school and extracurricular activities, thus enabling them to navigate in society’s dominant social institutions (qtd. in Stuber 14). Class, an important concern, remains elided in the above incident.

Hence, the five authors, whose four texts form the focus of this round robin review essay, emphasize class as a dominant lens to highlight a central point: educational institutions reproduce social inequities and traditional social class. Irvin Peckham points out how despite their best intentions, progressive teachers committed to critical pedagogy impose middle-class beliefs on working class students. Mike Rose examines how adult education and community college programs which provide nontraditional students with second chance opportunities may inadvertently limit students’ upward mobility and intellectual engagement. Jenny M. Stuber discusses the ways in which participation in a university’s social and extracurricular activities influences students’ socioeconomic world views. And Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton focus on how the party pathway of a large flagship university fundamentally shapes students’ chances for class reproduction and upward mobility. In short, these authors spotlight the primary role of class in undermining the progressive purposes and economic mobility of American education. This review takes up that central focus, beginning with the material conditions of class inequality, moving to the problem of a singular focus on class identity, and concluding with a discussion of complexity.

Compositionists Mike Rose and Irvin Peckham seek to address and redress the material conditions of class inequity by bringing out of the shadows the unacknowledged role of class. Through detailed descriptions, analyses, and critiques, these authors expose the ways that class undermines even the most determined and progressive intentions of teachers, administrators, programs, and institutions. Relying on moving narratives and story-telling dexterity, Rose provides stirring portraits of nontraditional students who encounter formidable barriers to success in administrative structures, institutional logistics, curriculum limitations, and staff and faculty mindsets (chapter 1). He seeks to counter stereotypes of the underprepared student promulgated by educational statistics on retention and persistence. Rose draws on anecdotes and personal experience to contend with this data, highlighting how those deemed “underprepared,” particularly students encouraged to enter vocational training tracks,
engage in liberal education and critical thinking (chapter 2 and 3). Peckham exemplifies the ways in which some critical pedagogies and transformative agendas are imbued with exclusionary, inequitable middle-class ideologies. He proposes that compositionists re-envision two staple genres, argument and critical thinking, from a class perspective: argument involves middle-class, intellectual gamesmanship (chapter 5) and critical thinking, deployed as an antidote to an instrumentalist emphasis in writing, reinforces a middle-class habitus (chapter 6).

Sociologists add to the conversation on class through qualitative and quantitative research. Students from upper-middle and affluent homes, Jenny M. Stuber tells us through meticulous research at a liberal arts college and a public flagship university, become engrossed in extracurricular activities including internships, study abroad, and Greek life, which allow them not only to acquire the types of social and cultural resources necessary for success upon graduation (chapter 3) but also to facilitate a sense of superior class identity and a widespread ignorance of structural class inequity (chapter 5). She also analyzes the institutional mechanisms that tend to pull in or push out working class students from the collegiate extracurriculum (chapter 4), resulting in class-specific “blind spots” that in turn contribute to the perpetuation of social disparities and limit the potential of social action. Armstrong and Hamilton argue, through empirical research and ethnographic observation, that large research universities reproduce privilege during the undergraduate years and that the replication of invisible class disparities extends to every stage of achievement, including women's post-college lives. For example, the women Armstrong and Hamilton describe as “socialites” are able to enter the party pathway and pursue easy majors by relying on parental support to obtain desirable jobs and live affluent lifestyles after graduation; meanwhile, two other groups of women, “underachievers” and “wannabes,” from working class homes, are at risk of downward mobility after graduation (chapter 8). These four texts individually and collectively provide interesting, nuanced, and robust descriptions of how class matters and why those invested in the progressive social ideals of eradicating class differences and social inequity through American education should pay attention and take heed.

However, such robust attention to the category of class, its hegemonic effects, and the resulting social inequities also constructs class as a “brute condition,” a term I use to emphasize the totalizing supremacy of class, a thread that circulates throughout each of these texts. Not only does no one
and nothing escape the influence of class, as described by these four texts, class also decenters student subjects, whose identities and social trajectories are manifested solely through their positionality within a specific class. Class interpellates these students and American education so fully that class (re)produces particular socio-historical circumstances that in turn (re)produces and thus limits subjectivity and future prospects. Within such class hegemony, freedom, agency, and self-determination are non-existent. Working class, underprepared students seldom escape their socioeconomic conditions (Armstrong and Hamilton chapter 6); affluent students succeed despite their easy majors and low GPAs so that class privilege (or lack thereof) replicates itself in subsequent generations (chapter 5). Second-chance institutions doom working class students to vocational training, often considered nothing more than credentialization (Rose chapter 2). Middle-class professors, who imagine themselves as progressive, impose their worldviews and ideologies on working class students, and, by so doing duplicate a middle-class worldview (Peckham chapter 8). Working-class students, while developing more nuanced awareness of class and privilege, criticize affluent and upper-middle class students at an individual level. But rarely do these students perceive privilege and inequity as structural or institutional and, thus, are unlikely to agitate for fundamental institutional changes (Stuber chapter 6). While these authors convincingly spotlight the prevalence and tenacity of class contributing to social inequities in American education, they also imply that its prison-house power is impossible to overcome, thus calling into question the possibility of social improvement through education and reform. If we are all fated to reproduce our social class and worldview despite our education, why attend university at all? These authors, in their valiant efforts to spotlight the importance of class, elide the interface of class with other categories including race, gender, sexuality, and religion, to name a few.

Even as these authors provide convincing arguments for the subjugating power of class and the inevitability of social reproduction, individual identity is never manifested solely through a single category alone. Rather, as the stinky skin incident highlights, class intersects with myriad factors to complicate beliefs and manifestations of social inequities. The adults might have reduced the episode to incipient racism, but the children revealed a more complicated dynamic. Although my daughter and her friend remained oblivious to the racism-countering frenzy that ensued, the parental and institutional responses illustrate the combined forces of race, class, gender, and culture. The ordering
of new classroom resources and the friendship-building dinner reflect not only the availability of resources but also the gendered imperative to use dialogue for bonding and negotiation of difference. In their efforts to communicate openly and nurture cross-racial solidarity, the parents struggled to overcome middle-class cultural discourse conventions that discouraged the overt public discussions of race and economics. For example, the friend’s mother confided her acute disappointment—“I did not think we had to explain to her so soon how others might see her”—in the “failure” of an expensive private educational setting to provide an inclusive, tolerant intellectual environment. This schooling demanded much financial commitment, the mother whispered, as she had just come out of her third “company downsizing.” However, all four parents, working professionals with solid middle class backgrounds, cued in on race alone as the intent behind the stinky skin comment.

Even as the parents might have addressed more explicitly the interface of race and class, sociologists Stuber, Armstrong, and Hamilton might have also done so in their research. For example, affluent students tend to misrecognize the nature of their privilege by attributing it to cultural factors rather than structural advantages, Stuber explains (chapter 5). Although affluence and privilege are also intertwined with whiteness, that interface gets short shrift. Armstrong and Hamilton detail the purposeful cultivation of an upper-middle class, white, heterosexual ethos for successful status accrual in the Greek sorority system. Women nurture “cuteness,” also privileged as “blondness,” through enhancements including hair coloring, colored contacts, and even cosmetic surgery, processes which require financial resources (82–4). But the existence of what Edward Bonilla-Silva calls “white habitus,” a term that refers to the constitution of homogeneous communities of white solidarity and the naturalization of white privilege (104), is never explicitly addressed by the authors. In addition, race is also tightly intertwined with class in Rose’s defense of democratic education for the working class and underprepared. For example, Rose begins his book with a moving portrait of Henry, a tattooed ex-convict who uses a wheelchair, seeking to redirect his life through schooling. Although we find out later that Henry is Latino, his race figures as just one of many data-points rather than an important factor in Rose’s narrative about underprepared students and second chances through education. While social, economic, racial, sexual, and religious inequality are experienced at the personal level, they are also intertwined with class issues, manifesting discursively, structurally, and institutionally.
All four texts highlight the necessity of robust strategies for engaging class issues in American education. Like research in these texts, we must turn an unflinching eye to the social inequities that plague the various segments of our society. But we must do so without reducing social inequality to a single cause. The stinky skin incident underscores the problematic of perceiving that statement solely as a byproduct of racism. The structural and institutional reproduction precipitated by all five adults—director and four parents—was based on an erroneous assumption that a three-year-old did indeed see, recognize, understand, and then voice the race-based, socially marked differences in skin tone; one child read another’s skin within the context of discriminatory discourse. By so doing, the adults elided the classed nature of the school’s response and the parents’ anxiety. The adults participated in producing, circulating, and perpetuating notions of race, class, and gender, specific to particular historical, economic, and institutional contexts. Such mutually constituting notions manifest in the interstitial spaces of quotidian discourses where everyday struggles and personal acts of meaning making shape and constrain symbolic action, even as symbolic action constructs and is constructed by institutions. It is by expanding the repertoire of analytical and discursive strategies that we can begin to move beyond the restrictive, yet well-meaning strategies, typified in the adults in my anecdote. What I discovered, as a final note, was how ill-equipped I was, despite the years of reading and writing about race, to engage in an ongoing “heart-to-heart” conversation, a dialogue of solidarity and common purpose between mothers, both of whom want to dismantle the dominant cultural notions about race, class, gender, and culture in order to nurture a more equitable, harmoniously diverse world. Perhaps our daughters, through their friendship and play with each other, have already brought forth that world.

Work Cited

For Whom Does It Profit?

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Just as I was writing this review, I found myself engrossed in the media coverage of the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington. It
was Obama’s soaring rhetoric at the Lincoln Memorial, not King’s, that captured my attention, though: “They [the marchers] were there seeking jobs as well as justice. . . . For what does it profit a man, Dr. King would ask, to sit at an integrated lunch counter if he can’t afford the meal?” Yes, for what profit, indeed?

What does it profit a student, the writers of these four texts might ask, to sit in a college classroom if that student isn’t likely to secure a better job, life, or position at the end of the journey? This question is not as easy to answer as the previous because despite moves to position higher education as a commodity, students generally do leave college having gained more than a purchased diploma. To what extent students can improve their prospects is debatable, which is one of the subjects these authors speak to in the four texts.

Where students are when they enter and leave worries the writers of the two sociological studies reviewed here, Paying for the Party and Inside the College Gates. In Paying, Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton, both sociologists, share the results of a five-year study on a college campus in which they embedded themselves into a women’s dorm. The researchers discovered typical “pathways” that the women followed as they progressed through the college experience, depending upon their class status when entering college, which had a strong effect upon their class status when graduating. The women were categorized into one of five classes ranging from upper to working class. One pathway, the “party pathway,” echoes the critique in Arum and Roksa’s Academically Adrift, while other pathways are less obvious, such as the “mobility pathway” and the “professional pathway.”

Armstrong and Hamilton use the term pathway, but these pathways are more like freeway turnpikes with very few exit ramps. Once students start in one direction, Armstrong and Hamilton make it clear that they find it difficult to turn around. The two researchers found that students’ performance during and after college was largely dependent on their social class when entering college: “women at MU were on track to land roughly in the same class location from which they started” (216). However, the research showed that when floundering, some working-class students transferred to a regional campus of this large, Midwest university, and they succeeded there. “Most upward mobility occurred among less privileged women who transferred from MU to regional campuses” (216).

Most interestingly, Armstrong and Hamilton touch on the deeply rooted gendered performance culture of undergraduate women at four-year institutions. Yet I wonder if they might have delved more deeply into the troubling reproduction of generational class stratification? After all, this stratification
seems to be based on surprisingly small class differences that become magnified upon entering and leaving college (such as whether one's hair is colored in the dorm room or in the salon). Why do these class anomalies become exaggerated in college?

In one chapter titled, “Socialites, Wannabes, and Fit with the Party Pathway,” Armstrong and Hamilton claim that the socialites intuitively understand how to speak, act, and dress in the university’s classed culture, which gives them an advantage in rushing for Greek houses and later in attaining a high-earning husband. Perhaps it is beyond their scope as sociologists to address the inequality that created this intuitive knowledge, but I cannot read the study without being bothered by this omission. In fact, reading this study was downright painful because I was a working-class student at a midwestern university. Was I a “wannabe,” a “striver,” an “underachiever,” according to Paying for the Party? Those are the options available in my class trajectory of “downward” or “at-risk” mobility (at best), and I can see pieces of my young self in each trajectory. What should a student on one of those trajectories do with this information?

Now, as a community college writing teacher, I have to wonder how working-class transfer students fit into the equation. Of the students on the most successful pathway, Armstrong and Hamilton write, “Achieving success was a family endeavor that had to start well in advance of attendance at MU. Class resources were necessary—only upper- or middle-class parents had the knowledge of higher education, money, and time to serve as effective navigators for their children” (181). What becomes of the third-year community college transfer student? With little parental support in most cases, are two-year institutions providing the scaffolding needed for these students to transfer and make it at universities like MU? Not at my institution and probably not at others like it, so this is one message from this study to hear and apply at the community college.

Jennie Stuber’s Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education took a different approach to class by only interviewing students from upper or working-class backgrounds. Her work reinforces the findings of sociologist Annette Lareau (cited in each of the four texts) and others in the field that students coming to college with cultural capital are more likely to have class mobility when they graduate.

Unlike the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which trumpets Horace Mann’s famous quote “Education is the great equalizer,” Stuber considers education to be a process toward equalization rather than an equalizer. She concludes that
higher education operates for many working-class students as the key to social mobility. Yet compared to their more privileged peers, limitations remain in the degree to which their social class backgrounds allow them to acquire new stocks of valuable social and cultural capital while completing their degree. (180)

While both studies situate the plight of the working-class student within an institutional context, two large midwestern universities and a selective liberal arts college, the population and diversity of working-class students studied may not be rich enough to extrapolate to the institutional setting in which most working-class students seek an education: the two-year college. In fact, more than 40 percent of all first-year composition courses are taught in the two-year college, which would seem to be the place to reach working-class students and explore issues of class, but Irvin Peckham would disagree with me (Reynolds vii).

In Going North, Thinking West: The Intersections of Social Class, Critical Thinking, and Politicized Writing Instruction, Peckham makes the case that the writing class is the place to teach writing; it is not the place to politicize, locate, identify, indoctrinate, or discuss matters other than writing. Troubled by the image of the writing class as a place to nurture conflict or socialize working-class students, Peckham picks apart critical pedagogy concerned with issues like class stratification—the same pedagogy many of us gobbled up and adopted as doctoral students, a demographic of teachers Peckham cautions against using critical pedagogy. Refreshingly honest and brutally reflective about his own pedagogy, Peckham weaves the philosophies of Bourdieu, Freire, and Gee into his version of writing “instrumentalism,” which he positions as one antidote to the current “pedagogical hubris” he believes has run amuck in the field since the social turn in composition. “In spite of their claims of ideological objectivity, teachers who move outside the area of their expertise are engaging in pedagogical hubris, the opposite of which is pedagogical humility, an announcement of one’s own expertise” (145). When Peckham describes himself as a teacher, though, I see him somewhere in the middle of the spectrum because he reflectively employs some critical teaching within the framework of instrumentalism. Perhaps many of us fall in the middle, especially those more experienced and further into their teaching careers.

While he doesn’t fully cast off teaching argumentation, Peckham argues against the traditional narrative-to-argument composition sequence. His quarrel seems to be with the genre, though, and how its false objectivity “conflicts with the working-class ethos” (68). Peckham does not convince me that
because argument might be a genre outside of the working-class student’s home repertoire it should be retooled or even deleted from composition courses. “The working classes are trained to grant authority on the basis of the social position of the person, while the middle-classes are trained to grant authority on the basis of the arguments they make” (84). First, I am not convinced by the two generalizations of working-class and middle-class argument. Second, isn’t argument analysis learned and a part of critical thinking, which is lauded in all facets of higher education?

Here is where Peckham does the unthinkable: he declares that the emperor is wearing no clothes! Yes, what has the focus on critical thinking done for the working-class student? It has “alienate[d] working-class students for reasons that post-modern middle-class teachers may dismiss as symptomatic of submersion in hegemonic discourse” (11). He challenges the most revered of course outcomes and textbook chapters in every composition program when he claims that “the link between critical thinking and argumentation is a prototypical middle-class concept, marginalizing working-class students, whose habitus is in conflict with this strand” (11). Could this be true? Of course, yet after reading Peckham’s book, I still don’t know what to do about it.

I teach writing students, primarily working-class students, using some version of Peckham’s instrumentalist approach, which focuses on “writing strategies that will help them survive undergraduate school and succeed in their after-school professional lives” (111). However, those strategies alone, without contextualized, critical readings of the situations and audiences in which to use them, shortchange the growing intellectuals in my writing class. And I am talking about more than analyzing rhetorical situation—I’m talking about deconstructing the world in which students write. I’m certain Peckham would disagree with this social strand of critical thinking and teaching that I’m describing here.

The difference, then, emerges between teaching students writing versus teaching students writing well enough to get a job or do well in the next class. We don’t empower the working-class student when we pretend they enter and leave the academy on an even track when studies and statistics demonstrate that working-class students have a longer and rockier marathon to run in terms of acquiring cultural capital and building it once they graduate. To me, pretending that the classroom and academy is depoliticized is akin to pretending that education is still the great equalizer. What Peckham has convinced me to do is to be aware of how “critical literacy teachers may unintentionally marginalize working-class students” (163).
My guess is that few in our field would argue with my statement above that the working-class students at my community college are growing intellectuals, whether they are pursuing a vocational program or a liberal arts associate's degree. Mike Rose finds the intellectual in vocational courses and seeks to bridge the academic/vocational divide. And this is where Rose's argument is most revelatory: the academic/vocational divide serves to further distance those in developmental education from the rest of the academy.

Using his typical, easy Rose-esque style of writing (i.e., “We have such demeaning ways of talking about the choices poor people have to make when the wolf is at their door” [63] ), he is strongest when critiquing the layers of oppression that continue to constrain remedial education, a subject to which he devotes quite a bit of this book. One might wonder why Rose renews the critique of skills and drills instruction in remedial courses when that pedagogy has passed its prime. But has it? Not at my “second chance” institution, and I would wager not at many others, either. Now, the dreaded grammar worksheets and tests are on a screen instead of on paper, just as Rose points out: “Exercises in the workbooks of the 1920s are similar to the ones in workbooks and on computer screens today” (122). Why are some developmental education courses still using a decontextualized skills and drills pedagogy? Rose calls on second chance institutions to do better. Remedial education has always been needed, he says, and it is time to start doing it well (129).

In Rose's look at second chance institutions he asks some particularly interesting questions, namely, “Do we have an adequate social safety net, and how effective are we at providing people a second chance? How open and welcoming are our core institutions—such as postsecondary institutions—and how adaptable?” (9). Rose later asks, “How can we enhance the liberal studies possibilities in a vocational curriculum and enliven and broaden the academic course of study through engagement with the world beyond the classroom?” (63). The answers to these questions, especially the last, could work to bridge the academic/vocational divide he identifies.

Rose points out this critical moment in the landscape of higher education, but what he may miss is a contextualized and specific critique of those outside the academy working to effect these changes. While he says that many initiatives in the academy “lack imagination,” his critique lacks sharp teeth because it doesn’t name specific initiatives. I’m left to wonder which ones he means. The Developmental Education Initiative (DEI)? The Gates Foundation's Completion by Design Initiative (CbD)? Achieving the Dream? My guess is
that Rose is referring to all of the above. He quotes Bill Gates preaching about how to “drill in” on missing skills: “He and all of us need to think creatively and generously about the way we use electronic technology in remediation, for such technology is quickly being cast as the magic bullet of basic skills” (140). But Rose doesn’t take it further—I yearn for more of Rose’s voice critiquing venture philanthropy and calling Gates and others to task here.

The community colleges and vocational programs that Rose discusses collect working-class students. I wonder, though, why does this class status require a “second chance”? Too often, perhaps not as much by Rose as by his readership at large, “second chance” is confused with “second choice” when perhaps the more accurate term is “only choice” or even “first chance.” I have always thought of the students at my community college as getting their first taste of higher education. For some, it is their “first chance” in a classroom as an adult; for others it is their “first chance” to take courses they actually chose; for others it is their “first chance” to prove they can make it in school or can make it without parental intervention.

Sure, for some students who stop out and return to the community college, it can be a second chance. But I would argue that these institutions are more often first chance institutions where students get their first shot at a degree—whether dually enrolled, fresh out of high school, or coming to education for the first time in midlife. Why must these programs be framed as second chances, presumably the second chance to succeed after one is born into the working class?

In a June of 2012 speech at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Barack Obama claimed, “A higher education is the clearest path into the middle class.” And a year and three months later, in August 2013, the Atlantic published an article on class that argued “social class has become the main gateway—and barrier to opportunity in America” (Garland). What message is this for the working-class student? Collectively, these four texts remind us that no clear path to the middle class exists for the working-class student. It is through rough travel on winding and bumpy roads, not on straight pathways, that the working-class student enters and leaves higher education. And for what does it profit the student, King would ask? And who is really profiting? First-chance writing teachers have the responsibility to find out as we travel beside our working-class students on these paths.
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