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In Push for Diversity, Colleges Pay Attention to Socioeconomic Class

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Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown U. Center on Education and the Workforce, says the lowest income groups are rising as a proportion of students at noncompetitive colleges, while the highest income groups are rising as a proportion of students at selective colleges.

By Peter Schmidt

It's hard to spot one of the most underrepresented minority groups at many four-year colleges: students and faculty members from the working class.

Efforts to promote campus diversity have tended to gloss over them, focusing instead on members of racial and ethnic minority groups, whose presence or absence is easier to detect. What little research has been done on working-class students and academics—mainly small-scale, qualitative studies based heavily on interviews or personal essays—has found that they generally try to fit in rather than draw attention to their backgrounds.

Complicating discussions of such faculty members and students is the lack of a universal definition of what "working class" means. Although the term has typically been used to refer to people who earn a living through physical labor, it can also apply to white-collar workers with incomes below the mean.

Education policy makers often consider being part of the first generation of one's family to attend college as a rough proxy for having a working-class background. According to Education Department data, students with parents without any education beyond high school account for about 36 percent of all enrollment at postsecondary institutions, with most being concentrated at less-competitive four-year colleges, two-year colleges, and proprietary institutions.

No comparable national data exist pertaining to college faculties; although the racial and ethnic composition of the academic work force is closely tracked, its socioeconomic background has not been widely studied.

There is reason to believe, however, that socioeconomic class is no longer dismissed as a key element of diversity in academe. Many advocates for working-class and low-income people say they are hearing much more discussion of the need for greater socioeconomic diversity in faculties and student bodies, even if such talk often does not translate into immediate, discernible change.

Helping drive such discussions are several academic groups formed to draw attention to working-class concerns. They include the Association of Working Class Academics, for scholars from working-class and low-income backgrounds, and the Working Class Studies Association and the Labor and Working-Class History Association, for scholars interested in research about and support for that population.

"People who talk about class in higher education feel like less of a voice in the wilderness," says Sherry L. Linkon, a co-director of Youngstown State University's Center for Working-Class Studies.

William R. Fitzsimmons, who, as dean of admission and financial aid at Harvard University, has emerged as a leading voice calling for selective colleges to make themselves more affordable to working-class students, says: "I honestly cannot think of any admissions person I know who is not looking—as sort of a major criteria of how well their year went—at how well they did in attracting people of different economic backgrounds."

Scholars who are also advocates for the working class say higher education's interest in that population has risen sharply over the past decade. They attribute the development to several other trends, including shifts in the political landscape, changes in the higher-education work force, the growing popularity of working-class studies as an academic field, and rising concerns about college access and the dominance of students from privileged backgrounds at selective colleges.

"Things have really changed, in terms of what is permissible to talk about, in the last 10 years," says Jack Metzgar, an emeritus professor of humanities and social justice at Roosevelt University. He is heavily involved with the Chicago Center for Working-Class Studies, a consortium of faculty members from colleges in and around that city.

"There is a recognition, one, that there are classes, and two, that not everyone is middle class," Mr. Metzgar says. He credits several well-received books published early in the decade—including *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Cornell University Press, 2000), and *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters* (Basic Books, 2000)—for helping draw attention to working-class white people as a distinct demographic group and inspiring new academic interest in that population.

The author of *The Working Class Majority,* Michael Zweig, is a professor of economics at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and director of its Center for Study of Working Class Life. He argues that class was long overlooked in academe partly because it was overshadowed by considerations of race and gender raised by the civil rights and women's movements, and partly because anticommunist sentiments during the cold war caused academic discussions of class to be regarded as "somehow un-American."

"We are digging our way out of that legacy now," he says, "and discovering that class really is an important feature of American life."

The debate over affirmative action and its potential alternatives has had the effect of drawing attention from across the political spectrum to the lack of socioeconomic diversity in selective colleges' enrollments. This past summer, for example, conservative pundits sparked a high-profile controversy in the media by accusing selective colleges of being biased against white, working-class applicants from politically conservative regions. Many colleges, along with education researchers whose work the pundits had cited as purportedly backing their assertions, refuted those claims.

The college prospects and success of working-class and poor students also have emerged as major concerns for those higher-education policy makers who believe many more Americans must pursue postsecondary education if the United States is to remain competitive in the world economy. President Obama has said that by 2020, he wants the United States to have a higher proportion of students with college credentials than any other nation. But the nation cannot get to that point unless many more people from modest means enter and complete college.

Youngstown State University's Center for Working-Class Studies, established in 1996, bills itself as the nation's first academic program to focus specifically on that population's concerns. Mr. Zweig set up the Stony Brook center in 1999, and the Chicago consortium formed in 2000. The three centers have come to see themselves as part of growing academic field akin to ethnic or women' studies: The Working Class Studies Association has more than 60 members, and more than 150 scholars from the United States and abroad belong to the Association of Working Class Academics, which grew out of an online support group for scholars from working class and poor backgrounds.

Kenneth Oldfield, professor emeritus of public administration at the University of Illinois at Springfield, retired in 2002 to focus entirely on studying the socioeconomic backgrounds of academics. He is a co-author of the book *Resilience: Queer Professors From the Working Class* (State University of New York Press, 2008), and plans this fall to publish papers on the socioeconomic backgrounds of the deans of law schools and medical schools.

In a study published in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* in 2001, Mr. Oldfield and another researcher surveyed faculty members at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and found them to be three times as likely as Illinois residents or Americans in general to have had parents with master's or professional degrees. Many professors from working-class backgrounds report feeling out of place on college campuses, and perceive the environment around them as extremely status-conscious and heavily shaped by—and focused on transmitting—middle-class values.

But even if faculty members with working-class backgrounds are relatively rare on many campuses, a rising number of faculty members from wealthier family backgrounds are having to get by on working-class incomes. A growing reliance on adjunct faculty members has had the effect of forcing many academics to live more modestly than their parents did, leading many to profess empathy for working-class students.

Steve M. Street, who had a middle-class upbringing as the child of a tenured college professor, says trying to make ends meet as an adjunct freshman writing instructor at Buffalo State College has made him "intensely aware of class issues." He sees himself as distinct from members of the working class in terms of his freedom to set his hours or engage in intellectual pursuits. But he relates to those who are unable to afford property or financially care for others as well as they

would like. "I feel," he says, "like a working-class person in my day-to-day existence, considering where I live, considering the feedback I get on my job, the opportunity for advancement."

"Being an adjunct has done a lot to open our eyes to what our students are dealing with," says Maria C. Maisto, an adjunct instructor of English at Cuyahoga Community College, in Cleveland, and president of the New Faculty Majority, an adjunct advocacy group. At faculty meetings at the University of Akron, where she previously taught, she says, "it is often the adjunct faculty members who will point out that students cannot afford textbooks that cost $75 a pop."

Having himself been a first-generation college student, Mr. Fitzsimmons played a key role in Harvard's 2007 decision to offer big tuition breaks to all but its wealthiest students. He says the move stemmed from a realization that its enrollments were becoming much less socioeconomically diverse, and "there was a danger we could really go back to the old days" when almost all of its students were wealthy.

A long list of other elite colleges, including Stanford University and the Universities of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Virginia, have similarly sought to cover most or all of the education costs of students of modest means. "I think we are making a lot of progress. Not just Harvard," Mr. Fitzsimmons says.

But while a few institutions—such as Amherst, Harvard, Princeton, and Williams—have managed to increase their enrollments of working-class and low-income students, many others have lost ground, and are enrolling fewer students who qualify for Pell Grants than they did before.

Thomas G. Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, has been tracking college affordability for about 40 years. He is discouraged when he looks beyond the rhetoric about making selective colleges more affordable to the institutions' actual enrollment statistics on low-income students, which generally have been dropping over the past 15 years. He complains that many such colleges appear to believe "they will rank better in *U.S. News & World Report* if they become more class exclusive," a conclusion that makes sense when one looks at how much weight the magazine gives to institutional wealth and the academic profiles of colleges' entering students.

In an analysis published in the new book *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College,* Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, and Jeff Strohl, the center's director of research, found that growth in the share of Americans going to college has been accompanied by rising stratification among the institutions in terms of the socioeconomic backgrounds of their students. Simply put, over the past three decades, students from the bottom half or fourth of the income distribution have accounted for a growing share of the enrollments at community colleges and noncompetitive four-year colleges, while students from the wealthiest fourth of society have accounted for a growing share of enrollments at the most selective institutions. What the nation has been left with, Mr. Carnevale says, is "a class-based system."

"My sense of all of this is that it is largely a structural problem," arising from pressures on selective colleges to build financial resources and admit more top students to gain more prestige and improve their competitive position, Mr. Carnevale says. "You get parents of upper-middle-class kids, with their checkbooks, chasing the more selective colleges, and the more selective colleges chasing their kids."