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

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Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. xv, 326 p. ISBN: 9780674049574. \$35.00.

Part of the American Dream is the belief that hard work, determination, and a college education lead to prosperity and professional advancement. *Paying for the Party* explores the experiences of a cohort of college women and requires readers to suspend existing beliefs about meritocracy, traditional notions of intelligence, bootstraps, upward mobility, and even Cinderella. In their place the authors weave together class, capital (social and cultural), tactical consumerism, and the policies of cash-strapped universities that “track” women into particular majors to develop a typology of women at a flagship public university in the Midwest.

The authors begin by introducing the forty-seven women with whom they shared a floor in a well-known “party dorm.” Using interviews and observational data collected by a small team of researchers over a five-year period, they offer insights into the participants’ backgrounds and explore how class-related resources affect matriculation, persistence, and the first-year experience. Three categories of students emerge from the analysis: “primed to party,” “cultivated for success,” and “motivated for mobility.” The analysis explores what each category has to offer other students and the institution, and highlights three pathways towards post-collegiate life with unique challenges, opportunities, and requirements. The most affluent women are often on the “Party Pathway,” which involves joining the Greek system, forming friendships with social peers from around campus, and gaining access to their male fraternity counterparts. The “Mobility” and “Professional Pathways” are associated with women from less affluent backgrounds, those who may not meet dominant culture standards of femininity, or those focused on academics. Forms of alienation common among the latter two pathways make it nearly impossible for many women to build community, find support, or develop the social networks often required for persistence and post-graduation career success.

Paying for the Party focuses mostly on the experiences of white, heterosexual women and does not integrate what is known about the experiences of women of color or women who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender in its analysis. This integration might provide a more complete picture of campus life for women and provide insights into how institutions can better support the success of all women. This oversight might be partially explained by

the book's lack of a well-defined theoretical framework on which to ground the study's data collection and analysis.

Readers familiar with the literature on college student cultures may not find much new in these categories or pathways. Horowitz's (1987) historical account of campus cultures found similar categorical types and relationships between wealth and the types of activities in which undergraduates participate. However, *Paying for the Party* does offer a valuable account of higher education's role in social reproduction and tracking in an era of increasing social divides between the haves and the have nots. The analysis is sophisticated but easily accessible. Most destructive are the images contrasting the campus as a playground for students at the apex of the social hierarchy with those striving to improve their social standing, or who resign themselves to simply earn a degree. *Paying for the Party* paints a *Downton Abbey*-ish social pecking order that challenges notions of egalitarianism or meritocracy, which may help partially explain waning public support for higher education.

Senior leaders at public comprehensive institutions should consider the findings of *Paying for the Party* when reflecting on campus policies. Practitioners who have worked at comprehensive institutions will be familiar with the pathways described in this book and will find themselves nodding frequently. These institutions have historically educated many of the students categorized as "motivated for mobility" and are increasingly trying to emulate their more prestige peers. Because pressures to admit affluent students will only increase over the next decade, state comprehensive universities will more than likely continue to use their limited resources to chase the small number of students from affluent families at the cost of undermining those individuals who can most benefit from a supportive academic environment.

Paying for the Party will leave some admissions officers, student affairs professionals, and campus administrators wondering what can be done to address the issues raised by the authors, but there are not many realistic answers in the text. Outside of drastic changes to institutional structures and financing mechanisms, perhaps the best we can hope for is working around the edges and, when possible, developing specialized support programs to help some students overcome social barriers. Those of us who value the unique mission of state comprehensive universities can use the ideas developed in *Paying for the Party* to view our own policies and ask whether they support or undermine the students we most want to educate.

Reference

Horowitz, H. L. (1987). *Campus life: Undergraduate cultures from the end of the eighteenth century to the present*. New York: Knopf.

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