

Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality, by Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, 344 pp., \$35.00 hardbound.

And We Shall Not All Be Dentists

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Resisting the march of social science from description to quantification, ethnography has emerged as an important branch of academic sociology. By putting meat on the bones of impersonal data, ethnographers claim to illuminate aspects of social life that would otherwise be lost and to discern more important insights than the numbers can ever yield. In a classic ethnographic exercise, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton, the authors of *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains*

Inequality, embedded themselves in a dorm at Midwest University (their pseudonym for a large middle-tier public flagship institution) and followed dozens of women through their years of college and beyond. They observed their subjects on a day-to-day basis and minutely documented their lives. Their sustained and exhaustive effort yielded myriad observations and a few key conclusions.

According to the authors, Midwest U has fostered the emergence of three distinctive undergraduate tracks: “party,” “professional,” and “mobility.”

The so-called “party pathway” creates by far the strongest gravitational pull, distorting every aspect of students’ lives—including, most importantly, the prospects of those who can ill afford to waste their college years in a frenetic quest for social popularity. Why has the party pathway emerged, and why does it dominate? The answer should not surprise us. (This is a modern academic study, after all.) To make a long story short, the party pathway serves the interests of the rich, the privileged, and the university establishment itself. Impelled by the unrelenting need to raise money and compete with peer institutions, Midwest U

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favors affluent, upper-middle-class students. By offering a disconcerting panoply of academically meager majors such as hospitality studies and sports communications, and aided and abetted by an elaborate and well-funded system of fraternities and sororities, Midwest U gives the most-favored women what they appear to want: an easy-going whirl of socializing and fun.

The girls for whom this track is tailor-made generally arrive with a group of friends from their high school or hometown who provide a well-developed social circle. Virtually all hail from comfortable, intact families, and have doting and indulgent parents ready, willing, and able to provide advice, old boy job referrals, and generous subsidies upon graduation. Meanwhile, women from more humble backgrounds come with few of these advantages and are far less able to negotiate the social and academic scene at the large, complex institution that is Midwest U. Hailing mostly from high schools in rural areas and small towns, with relatively weak academic backgrounds, and from families that are more fragile and fractured, especially by divorce, they struggle to fit in. Their parents know very little about picking useful and realistic majors, have few

connections to high-powered job markets, and offer less savvy and support, financial and otherwise. Most of these women are either sucked into a party lifestyle they can ill afford, or find themselves alienated, isolated, or overwhelmed.

Paying for the Party is engrossing and well-written. It provides a vivid narrative of women's lives during and after college. Despite these virtues—or perhaps because of them—the book evokes a familiar aphorism: the plural of anecdote is not data. While the study's depth of observation offers a fascinating look at the intricacies of college life, the necessary intensity of such an examination greatly limits the number of subjects. That turns out to be a fatal flaw. The problem comes down to that critical issue in any social science study, the one that drives the trend towards quantification: Do the study's observations yield valid generalizations that can provide the basis for sound social policy?

By the authors' own admission, the residence hall on which their book focuses is a "party dorm" that draws disproportionate numbers of moneyed women intent on revelry. One cannot escape the conclusion that the authors went looking for the "party pathway." But even the women they profile varied widely in

ability and ambition. Although most took easy majors and graduated to the kinds of jobs in fashion, media, and consumer-oriented businesses that require little academic knowledge or depth of learning, a few made it into the professional world and achieved serious career-track positions.

So the “party pathway” did not derail everyone. More worrisome for the significance of the party pathway story is that, as the authors themselves note, the great majority of students at Midwest U (approximately 83 percent) were not sorority and fraternity members. And Greek organizations were not the only centers of social life. Armstrong and Hamilton intermittently refer to alternative residential options and social activities, including theme-based dorms and clubs. Although the freshman dorm assignments were not random—women could request residence halls, which meant that similar women often grouped together—that factor cut both ways. Some of the more venturesome subjects, who wearied of the party dorms’ cliques and distractions, escaped to housing with more like-minded students.

These facts just highlight the questions that remain in readers’ minds. How many working-class

women at Midwest U actually found their way to more hospitable environments? Did strivers and wannabes fare better elsewhere on this large campus? All in all, readers can never shake the nagging feeling that they are missing out on facets of university life that other students took advantage of. Only a more systematic and representative survey of the student body, including a comprehensive look at the fate of less affluent women, could determine whether the class-related conflicts the authors observed were repeated across the school. Lacking this information, it is hard to know what secure conclusions can be drawn from the picture this book presents.

Some of Armstrong and Hamilton’s observations are nonetheless revealing and disturbing. One of the most striking findings is how few of their women subjects from non-privileged backgrounds actually succeeded. Although they all arrived expecting to rise above their origins, few achieved that goal. Indeed, only a minority of the women in this category managed to make it through Midwest U in four years, and a significant number never graduated; most ended up taking time off or transferring to less competitive institutions. It appears that none of the less affluent women profiled

was admitted to a top graduate or professional school, and few found jobs that required a university degree.

The authors want to blame the university and the “structural” impediments to upward mobility it creates, but their effort is strained. The sources of these women’s troubles were myriad and varied. It is worth noting that many, regardless of background, were remarkably unformed and ill-socialized. College is supposed to be the “best years of your life”—when students are expanding their horizons, making intellectual discoveries, and widening their social circle—but this is not what these women were about. Intolerance, snobbery, and shallow preoccupations prevailed among the privileged. Narrow-mindedness, unrealistic goals and expectations, and general aimlessness were evident among those from more modest origins.

Animosities and divisions created a grim atmosphere of pettiness that undermined the educational ideal at every turn. Armstrong and Hamilton note the lack of social skills among working-class women, who were faulted by the more affluent girls for their weight, thoughtless biases, lack of social graces, dowdy and cheap clothes, and deficient “femininity.” But the upper-middle-class women—despite

their sleeker and more sophisticated veneer—could be rude, uncivil, and self-absorbed. Extensive quotes reveal their talk to be vacuous, trite, and sometimes laced with profanity (“sucks” is a favorite word) as well as those now ubiquitous “likes” and “you knows.” They felt free to make a racket, play deafening music, and engage in loud arguments with their boyfriends at all hours, and didn’t hesitate to insult and snub those outside their social circle. Although their ungracious behavior was not Midwest U’s doing, the university’s failure to enforce or even encourage basic decorum did not help. Adult supervision was little in evidence in the residence halls or elsewhere. Perhaps that’s as it should be, if we are to teach students how to make adult mistakes and decisions, but such hands-off practices have a real downside when students lack basic courtesy. One is left with the impression that, despite their willingness to pull every string and pay every bill, the parents of these students are not doing their job.

In addition to a generous dose of meanness and insufficient social graces, many of these women displayed a severe paucity of initiative. Too many took the academic path of least resistance, settling into courses of study that failed to impart useful skills or prepare them for further education.

Almost all the women in this study were distinctly unbookish, and cared little for learning, truth, or intellectual pursuits. The problem was especially severe, and consequential, among the least privileged, who did not seem to comprehend the demands—intellectual and otherwise—of jobs to which they aspired, and who often lacked clear academic or personal goals. To make matters worse, most of the women from humble backgrounds were hobbled by the vortex of their origins. They felt drawn by duty, habit, and loyalty to the families and friends they left behind, who often failed to encourage their aspirations. Such loyalty often extended to hometown high school boyfriends, who were almost always less accomplished and ambitious and often exemplified the ills, such as poor work ethic, drug addiction, and petty crime, that increasingly bedevil working-class males. Involvement with such men almost invariably dragged these women down.

In seeking the cure for this bleak situation, Armstrong and Hamilton fault Midwest U's lack of individualized support for students "at risk." They envision a panoply of programs and services that nurture and advise less privileged women through college, all accomplished in loco parentis. But it's not clear that even a massive effort along these

lines would do much good. Many of the least successful students' problems come down to deficiencies of judgment, purpose, and direction that predated college and have complex roots in personality, family dynamics, and class attitudes. Addressing these deficits in college surely comes too late. And even if that were not so, most state universities today are far too large to tackle them effectively. Not only is the task of imbuing students with the qualities needed to get through college best left to parents and communities, but the project of mass socialization and intensive hand-holding that Armstrong and Hamilton envision, by adding to the overwhelming burden of dealing with large numbers of marginal students, collides with the goal of educating ever larger portions of the population.

Which brings us to the vexed matter of intellectual ability. Even the authors admit that a number of the less privileged women who fared poorly at Midwest U were just not very smart. Their schedules were loaded with remedial classes and they struggled with the academically demanding prerequisites for graduate or professional school or for well-paying careers. Two of the women the authors present in detail, including a predoctoral student and an aspiring classical archeologist, failed to gain admission to any post-college

program of their choice, despite being encouraged and pushed along by academic advisors and professors who seemed genuinely interested in their progress and careers. Although many privileged girls were also intellectually average or worse, there were more successes in this group. And the well-off underachievers were often rescued by their parents, whose money and influence sheltered them from the demands of post-graduation life, at least for a while.

Not so for most (if not all) of the working-class women, who did not have the big-city connections to get them increasingly important unpaid internships or relatively undemanding entry-level jobs, and who could not look to their families to fund their apartments, health club memberships, and a lively twenty-something social life. For these women, the cost of useless courses, missed opportunities, bad grades, and a general lack of seriousness was particularly steep. Being in over their heads academically was made even worse by the weight of debt they accumulated. Although Midwest U, as a state school, does not charge as much as private colleges, these women often struggled to pay their fees and expenses. The money they owed, too often after failing to complete a useful or lucrative course of study, made it hard for them to

stay afloat financially in the real world and required many to move back home and work at multiple relatively unskilled jobs to make ends meet.

The fact that less privileged women had a harder road than the more affluent women is, of course, unfair. But life is not fair, and it's unclear whether it has ever been otherwise. Although the twentieth century saw higher education expand rapidly and standards of living for everyone increase, true upward mobility—that is, rising above one's social class of birth—was far from automatic. In fact, the precarious climb from rags to riches and working-class to upper-middle-class has always been the purview of the determined few, requiring zeal, acumen, a degree of ruthlessness, and a shrewd willingness to ape one's betters and distance oneself from progenitors. Intelligence and a strong work ethic (as well good luck) certainly help. Armstrong and Hamilton obviously believe that it's the university's job to even the playing field and ensure that students' dreams come true. But it's not the university's fault that outstanding ability and iron determination have always been—and will always be—in relatively short supply, that drive and talent cannot readily be imparted to those who lack it, and that ambitious people without money and connections

have no choice but to actually achieve something. Although real opportunity does exist, true equality of opportunity never will. And that is what the authors of this book are loath to accept.

A strategy universities could adopt is one that the authors don't even propose: tightening academic standards and eliminating the roster of easy pseudo-majors and programs that clutter the academic landscape. Midwest U should abolish communications, sports studies, travel studies, event planning, and the like, and stick to the rigorous core of the traditional arts and sciences. The notion this would undermine job-readiness is transparently implausible. A more demanding curriculum would serve as more than ample preparation for the careers in media, entertainment, and fashion that the affluent party girls here seem to favor.

Of course, one reason that easy majors have proliferated is that, without them, many would flunk out or not seek higher education at all. Thus, increased rigor would come at a price: many students, including unserious, affluent students intent on partying their way through late adolescence on their parents' dime, would not make it through or would forgo college altogether—an observation sure to discomfit the “college for all” crowd and displease the battalions

of academic administrators who count on the partying upper crust to foot the bill for the university's elaborate infrastructure. But at least students of modest means wouldn't end up thousands of dollars in debt, discouraged and aggrieved by the conviction that society has failed to deliver what it promised. And well-off party girls who forgo college because it's too hard could presumably do the same jobs they now perform after four years of little or no real learning—jobs that arguably should not require a college degree.

The real lesson to be learned from *Paying for the Party* is that, as Charles Murray argued so convincingly in *Real Education*, too many people are going to college. And most who are there are either woefully underprepared or fundamentally uninterested in what a university has to offer. Our effort to educate an ever-increasing share of the population is well-meaning. Egalitarian ideals, not to mention a vast and expensive university establishment, make it difficult to change course. But the expectation of mass upward mobility is simply unrealistic. Only a few can become professionals, attend business school, or even succeed at a competitive four-year college. Most people are not above-average, let alone capable of entering the elite. Not everyone can be a dentist, and

not everyone should be. Yet that appears to be the expectation. Society can't run on these principles. To be sure, college is not just for career preparation. Self-cultivation and expanded horizons are vital and laudable objectives. The truth is, unfortunately, that only a small portion of the population is really interested in, or can profit from, a demanding academic experience.

Yet many influential people appear to harbor the parochial belief that only an upper-middle-class life is worthwhile, that those who do not complete college are failures, that most jobs available in our economy are "dead-end," and that vocational schooling is the path of the reckless and feckless rather than hardworking men and women. They refuse to accept that higher education is *not* on the list of requirements for a fulfilling life. *Paying for the Party* vividly illustrates that these misguided attitudes come at a cost. By compounding dashed hopes with a crushing load of debt and engendering futile dreams of universal upward mobility, we diminish rather than enhance the lives of too many young people.

Although Armstrong and Hamilton probably didn't intend to impart this message, this study is telling us that we should stop pushing students so hard and adopt a more realistic view of their ambitions and abilities. Until and unless college is free (which is not going to happen soon), students of limited financial means and modest ability should be encouraged to pursue lower-cost and more practical options. At the very least, community colleges and less-competitive, vocationally-oriented institutions should be recognized as the best path forward for all but the most driven and academically prepared. This is especially so for students who cannot afford to waste four years and tens of thousands of dollars. Indeed, many of the most successful working-class women profiled in *Paying for the Party* ended up transferring out of Midwest U to less prominent regional institutions. These women's trajectories rarely led to elite jobs, but did result in steady employment. We would all be better off if they had chosen this path in the first place.