



## *Social Reproduction and College Access: Current Evidence, Context, and Potential Alternatives*

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### **Abstract**

*Social reproduction theory identifies schooling as a primary means for the perpetuation of the dominant class's ideologies, values, and power. The ability to access college is so closely tied to these constructs that it contributes to this dominance and marginalization. Social stratification is not only mirrored in higher education, but the exclusion of individuals from lower income families and people of color fosters oppression within educational environments. Through a review of recent research and evidence, we highlight the factors contributing to the attainment gap, the question of how social class and stratification influence college access and choice, and resultant associated personal and social costs. We find that current pedagogical practices, high-stakes testing, student and family expectations, and historical oppression all contribute to a lower level of college access and limited choices for lower socioeconomically situated students and students of color. We also find that the costs to society remain numerous and substantial and can manifest themselves as limited inclusion of non-dominant groups in higher education.*

**Keywords:** *higher education, socio-economic status and race, college access and choice, social reproduction theory, inclusion*

**T**he promise of social mobility has been a longstanding source of pride for Americans (Karabel & Astin 1975). Undoubtedly, this has served as a powerful foundation supporting notions and promises regarding the “American Dream.” Education has served as the basis of that promise, and is often considered a panacea for reducing social stratification (Muller & Schiller 2000). The U.S. education system of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, does not necessarily inspire the same pride held so dearly about the American Dream. The current system, once thought to support equality and equity, instead remains a perpetrator of class stratification (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Karl & Katz, 1987; McDonough 1997); and has amplified social disparities as traditional notions of merit remain the hallmark of college admissions offices (Hossler 2004; Park & Hossler 2015). In fact, the likelihood that high school graduates will go to college declines as family income drops (Baum 2001; Perna 2006; Serna & Birnbaum 2014; Serna 2015).

What is more, traditional measures of merit are so closely tied to familial wealth that it is easy to argue that these metrics are instead capturing a family's financial standing rather than a student's academic ability. Extensive research on college access provides clear evidence—college choices available to students are not equal when they come from disadvantaged families. The lack

of class stratification that was once a point of pride has diminished, and America continues to face a “stratification of higher education opportunities” (McDonough 1997, 1). The factors contributing to this stratification are complex, relating to socioeconomic status, a student’s secondary school experiences, and student as well as family attitudes and expectations (Hearn 1984; Hossler 2004; McDonough 1997; 2004; Park & Hossler 2015; Thomas, Alexander & Eckland 1979).

In this review essay, we employ social reproduction theory (SRT) as a lens to answer the following research questions:

How does social stratification influence college access in the current context?

What are some of the associated personal costs of social reproduction in the current context?

What are some of the associated social costs of social reproduction in the current context?

The three interrelated research questions will help us more carefully frame the analysis and answer these questions while accounting for current conditions in higher education. We hope to stimulate further critical analysis on the topic from a social reproduction perspective. In approaching college choice and access from this lens, a primary motivation is to once again highlight the role higher education plays in retaining and reinforcing power and class structures. In so doing, practitioners, decisions-makers, and researchers can, hopefully, approach the topic from multiple perspectives, and perhaps seek to reexamine their own thinking on the topic and how they might challenge the norms associated with power and class in college access and choice; as well as the embedded assumptions that make up practices, policies, and research.

### **Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) in Education**

Pierre Bourdieu defined social reproduction as a theoretical framework to analyze the role of schools or other social sites in the perpetuation of dominant cultures (Giroux 1983). As a theory of the oppressed, Bourdieu uses social capital theory to define three forms of capital—economic, symbolic, and cultural—that influence how the lower classes are oppressed and how the upper classes continue to thrive, thereby reproducing existing class structures (Bourdieu 1986). In an application of Bourdieu’s theory to higher education, St. John and Paulsen (2001) define economic capital as the financial means of a social class; symbolic capital or social status, as represented by status symbols such as a high professional position in society; and cultural capital as the ability for a class to transmit its values and influence.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) provide a rather compelling logic for the theory of SRT and its corresponding narrative to delve deeper into the direct relationship between its philosophical positioning and the nature and structure of society. And while it is beyond the scope of this analysis to restate every proposition, as outlined, it allows Bourdieu and Passeron to provide several rationales supporting the premise that schools and pedagogy serve as a primary means for perpetuating class stratification. One example is related to examination as well as the use of academic language.

In SRT, an examination is generally used to exert social power over students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in addition to excluding students from lower classes from pursuing or being successful in higher education. In excluding these students, a certain type of social capital is held

to retain value and social currency. Additionally, lower social status students tend to “self-eliminate” by choosing to not enroll in college after scoring low on admissions tests or failing academic work that so readily informs the admissions process on many campuses.

Indeed, one begins to suspect that the functions of the examination are not reducible to the services it performs for the institution, still less to the satisfactions it gives the teaching staff, as soon as one observes that most of those excluded from studying at the various levels of education eliminate themselves before being examined, and the proportion of those whose elimination is thus masked by the selection overtly carried out differs according to social class. (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990, 153)

This notion is supported by Hoxby and Avery (2013), who note that most low-income, highly productive individuals do not apply to selective colleges and universities. Additionally, one is hard pressed not to see that the examination and academic work in general, legitimize a set body of knowledge, which is conceived of and introduced through pedagogy developed and delivered by the dominant class (Au 2008). When viewed through Bourdieu’s cultural capital lens, this legitimized content has the effect of “marginalizing or disconfirming other kinds of knowledge, particularly knowledge important to feminists, the working class, and minority groups” (Giroux 1983, 268). Students from high social classes are socialized within the family unit with the language of academics. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, 73) refer to “linguistic capital” and “ability for language” to not only provide the means for students to feel comfortable within an academic environment, but language “provides us with tools to categorize and manipulate complex ideas.” When students fail, they tend to leave the system; and thus, the educational system preserves and reinforces the division between the classes.

The educational system in the U.S. and in particular the higher education system, clearly privileges certain groups over others (Serna 2015). These groups tend to be rather homogenous in terms of social capital and background. In other words, college campuses tend to be made up largely of individuals who can access the structures so closely aligned with cultural, economic, and linguistic capital. It is these same power structures that arguably help some students feel much more at home on campus than others.

The real success of a particular class’s push for societal predominance occurs when it uses its political, moral, and intellectual leadership to articulate a basic world view that subordinate classes come to adopt. This world view becomes...the “common sense” of the society. It is accepted as universal and natural, as something of a given, together with the unequal class rule that it legitimates. (Karl & Katz 1987, 4)

The intellectual leadership of American universities perpetuates dominant class beliefs, values, and structures.

College access is one of the most influential and instrumental tools available to society for providing individuals with opportunity. McDonough (1997) defines opportunity as the: “prospect for mobility from the individual’s present position to higher- and lower-level positions” (2). However, a significant impediment to college access arises when certain groups of students are unable to access higher education in an implicit, but nonetheless systematic, way. Indeed, SRT suggests that the system of schooling perpetuates the position of the dominant class within a society (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Giroux 1983) and this has arguably manifested itself in a very explicit way

on college campuses. While this approach is not necessarily novel (see McDonough 1997; Paulsen & St. John 2002; Perna 2006), it does provide a rather well-suited lens for examining current conditions facing higher education. Namely, that there are significant and systemically driven differences between certain groups when accessing and choosing a college (Hoxby & Avery 2013).

Taken at face value, SRT identifies schooling as a perpetrator of class division and power hierarchies created by a capitalistic culture, and serves only to maintain the values and ideals of wealth and a class-based society. Gewirtz and Cribb (2003) propose SRT has evolved as a theory, moving from a post-positivist influence to a post-structural form. This newer approach seeks to “unpack” SRT and use it to analyze the relationship of schools and class. It can provide a lens to explore how schools and, in this case, higher education, perpetuate the social structures of the dominant class through the situational nature of education. Students are defined with a broad brush; they “are defined not only in relation to class divisions but in relation to a wider range of intersecting social axes including class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, and ability” (Gewirtz & Cribb 2003, 244). Under this new definition of social reproduction, schools and institutions can serve a variety of purposes. That the attainment gap at all levels remains steady, and in some cases is rising, indicates that education still serves as an oppressive means; but there are also instances where schools can become an instrument for social justice. In other words, that these structures are in place is clear, that they must remain in place is not. Indeed, our aim in this section was to highlight the inequities raised by dominant power structures. It should inspire those associated with higher education to rethink and reflect on how these practices and ideas are perpetuated daily and to challenge them to foster a more democratic and socially just society.

### **Barriers**

A hallmark of the discussion of education, social reproduction, and cultural capital has been the American family and how it influences, erects or lowers barriers, and enhances or impedes social mobility. Perna (2006) suggests that structural barriers, those elements that oppress and prevent students from accessing higher education, are ascribed to the family and include race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and social class. Similarly, Serna (2015) underscores the role played by socio-economic status, and insider identities when speaking to college access, persistence, and retention. In this section we outline some of the primary factors associated with social capital theory and how they relate directly to the current context of higher education.

### **Social Class**

Notions of the dominant class are repeatedly referenced throughout the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990). They note that: “education tends to reproduce the system of culture of the social formation contributing to the reproduction of the power relations that put that culture into its dominant position” (39). In the United States the dominant class remains primarily white, male, heterosexual, and wealthy. In fact, much of the research on college access indicates that students from the dominant class are much more likely to complete a college degree, and thereby reinforce their position (Au 2008; Paulsen & St. John 2002); this is especially the case since traditional notions of merit and ability undergird the current system (Hossler 2004; Serna 2015). Not only do more students from dominant class backgrounds attend college, they tend to attend more selective institutions. Conversely, when low-income, underrepresented students with high ability apply or

attend, they are more likely to attend a less selective college than their counterparts from the dominant group (Hoxby & Avery 2013).

Looking at social class structure through the lens of SRT, there is an unmistakable power hierarchy present in the classroom that extends to the discussion of access and choice, and is exasperated with a rather limited perspective of “merit.” Even as colleges and universities have sought to expand participation and retention of diverse students, research shows that efforts have seen only limited success (Avery, Howell, & Page 2014; Bettinger et al. 2012; Park & Hossler 2015; McPherson & Schapiro 1999; Serna 2015). Paulsen and St. John (2002) share a substantial volume of research that theoretically and empirically demonstrates how schooling reinforces the dominant class structure resulting in marginalization of students from non-dominant backgrounds.

Teachers, who are also traditionally from the dominant class, implement national tests (Au 2008), use language and linguist structures (Au 2006; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990), and call upon social networks (Au 2006; 2008) that are part of a dominant student’s habitus. These advantages come naturally and with very little effort to those who are a part of the dominant class (Paulsen & St. John 2002). Referred to as cultural capital, this set of attributes plays a significant role in maintaining a stratified social class system (Perna 2006) in addition to maintaining power structures. In higher education, this idea is clearly expounded upon by Giroux (1983), who defines cultural capital as social characteristics that “come naturally” to the dominant class (manners, language, personal networks) but must be learned by lower classes. In a related vein, McDonough (1997) suggests that cultural capital may provide students with access to resources that promote college-related advantages, and states, “the most stubborn barriers to parity in entrance to college, are in social class background” (5).

Furthermore, the current system of higher education relies on an authoritative model for advancing and delivering knowledge. There is a strong reliance on experts to share their knowledge with students, and then these same experts determine success by providing students with a rating (grade). Dominant class families have done an excellent job of preparing each successive generation to navigate this system well, to do so under these conditions, and in such an environment. The current model contradicts the social and cultural norms of marginalized, and often more relational communities or groups. As an alternative, this model could do more to incorporate more relationship-based education. If the current system is to become inclusive, it must account for the relational nature of cultures such as Black and Hispanic communities (Delgado-Gaitan 1992). Creating learning environments that reflect these values would provide educational structures that are more familiar and inclusive. By providing a learning construct that supports values other than those of the dominant culture, it is possible to create a model where many can be successful.

### **Socio-Economic Status**

In addition to holding the social and cultural capital resources, the dominant class also holds a great deal of wealth. Studies show that low income is significantly correlated to lower success rates than any other factor (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall 2006; Lee 2002; Paulsen & St. John 2002; Tinto 1975). Respectively, SRT suggests the current income level of a student’s family is the primary indicator for the individual’s future income and economic stability. Where social class influences values, culture, and behavior (symbolic and cultural capital), socio-economic status dictates financial resources (economic capital) available to individuals (St. John &

Paulsen 2001). This reproduction of family wealth, and intergenerational wealth transfers are often attributed to the achievement gap in education (Korn 2015; Lee 2002).

The achievement gap continues to widen between individuals who come from families with fewer socioeconomic resources (Lee 2002). Lee's (2002) empirical study indicates that for populations from low-income families, the achievement gap mirrors the income gap. Not only do students from low-income families earn less over the course of their lifetimes, they also find themselves less able to generate wealth for future generations. For example, 88 percent of the wealthy investor households in the U.S. are white, and only 3 percent are Black and Hispanic (Ladson-Billings 2006). And while some progress has been made in terms of underrepresented students participating in higher education, a 2012 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides evidence that persistence and access gaps remain (Ross, et al. 2012). Moreover, recent data from the NCES/Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) shows that for Black and Hispanic students, the total percentage enrolled in postsecondary education hovered around 15 percent and 16 percent respectively, while the number of white students was just above 59 percent (2015). In other words, the wealth and education gaps, while somewhat different, nonetheless appear to mirror one another in quite obvious ways.

Given that these trends guide a great deal of the discourse around higher education policy, research, and practice, economic capital as a component of Bourdieu's SRT provides a strong theoretical perspective for understanding what is an evident, ongoing, and widening concern surrounding the gap in income between the dominant class and lower classes (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). Schooling, like other social structures, reproduces social class via the allocation of resources, which in turn relies upon research, practice, and policy.

The research, practice, and policy guiding resource allocation are also closely connected to paying for college. In the United States, policies have shifted aid toward student loans and away from grants as the primary means for supporting low-income students (Nora & Horvath 1989; Paulsen & St. John 2002; Serna 2015). Additionally, institutions are caught in a difficult situation when trying to balance expectations around merit that maintain social currency and also contribute to social reproduction. Hossler (2004) outlines the manner in which traditional measures of ability, net revenue generation, and diversity can work at cross-purposes. In practice, institutions have shifted significant resources toward merit aid, which has arguably shifted resources away from those from the neediest families. That this inequity carries over to the college access discussion is clearly underscored by McDonough (1997, 142) who found significant differences in how families planned to pay for college. For high socioeconomically classified families, students did not have to consider finances; they knew their parents would "pay for everything." Students from low socioeconomically situated families, however, were highly conscious of the financial component, and made comments about living at home to save money and continuing to work while in college. Baum (2001) presents evidence that financial constraints are a significant barrier for low-income students: "The income-based gap in enrollment rates is even more disturbing because it has increased over time" (51). Taken together with social class, socioeconomic status clearly plays a role in the implicit, but powerful, calculus that students undertake when considering whether or not to attend college and where to attend (Paulsen 2001a). Viewed through a social reproduction lens, what is clear is that the social capital so readily available to those from dominant groups clearly privileges them when accessing higher education, which further enhances reproductive mechanisms.

## **Race**

Research indicates people of color are overrepresented in low-income families. According to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau compiled by the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, as of 2012, 27.2 percent of Black and 25.6 percent of Hispanic individuals lived below the poverty threshold as compared to only 9.7 percent of Non-Hispanic Whites. This fact should come as no surprise when viewed through a social reproduction lens. The dominant class is white and therefore those who are not white are disadvantaged in our education system (Ladson-Billings 2006), particularly when one takes into account the role of socioeconomic status and adds to it the close correlation it shares with race. In her research on the achievement gap, Ladson-Billings (2006) draws a picture of the history of education in the United States. She illustrates repeatedly how social reproduction frames the U.S. education system for people of color. African American slaves and early-emancipated slaves were forbidden to seek education. Native American Indian youth were forced to assimilate into white schools and found themselves unable to “fit comfortably into reservation life or the stratified mainstream” (5). And, there have been disparities in education for Latina/o students throughout the history of U.S. as evidenced by the Lemon Grove Incident, where the Superior Court of San Diego County ruled the segregation of Mexican and Mexican American students was in violation of state laws (Alvarez 1986). Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests the “education debt” created from decades of opportunity loss for non-white students cannot be repaid overnight, and shares a quote from Robinson (2000) regarding the gap between the races, “no nation can enslave a race...pit them against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch” (74). As noted previously, recent data from the NCES shows that a gap remains. What is more troubling however, is that this gap, once almost closed in the 1980s, has crept back to levels unseen since the 1960s (Perna 2006).

In closing this section, it is important to revisit the fact that the discussion around social class, socioeconomic status, and race all remain salient and highly researched topics. What this likely indicates is that little has changed for those from non-dominant backgrounds. This could also provide evidence that the role played by the intersections of policy, practice, and research which include college counselors, admissions offices, high-stakes testing, research, and aid policy have not necessarily formed a cohesive relationship so as to affect change in a comprehensive manner. Perhaps by revisiting these discussions with a critical eye toward social reproduction and its underlying effects and factors, a better, more far-reaching discourse can occur around college access and its relationship to dominant and non-dominant group relationships. Next, we turn to a discussion of SRT and how it relates to college access in terms of values, expectations, and examinations.

## **College Access and Choice**

In the process of “screening out” students from the non-dominant class, Bourdieu (1986) notes there are individual student characteristics that contribute to the attainment gap related to the factors cited in the previous section. In the college choice literature these characteristics are often attributed to the social elements of individual life instilled by families, promoted in secondary schools, and perpetuated through peer effects (Alvarado & López-Turley 2012; Byndloss et al.

2015; Fryar & Hawes 2012; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith 1989; McDonough 1997; Perna 2006); these are discussed below.

## **Values**

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) work would suggest that the college value system matches that of the dominant culture; and therefore, those with different values are screened out, in support of social reproduction and maintenance of extant power structures. It is in this manner that values are an aspect of the cultural capital within SRT that perpetuates the prevailing social structure. Paulsen and St. John (2002) explore how students respond to financial factors that are consistent or inconsistent with the student's social class, and how these value judgments support a student's decision to attend college. Low-income students are more averse to debt and are more cost-conscious (St. John & Paulsen 2001). Low-income students are more likely to attend public and two-year colleges, less likely to live on campus, may need to work to support family, and expect to complete only a vocational credential or some college (Paulsen & St. John 2002).

McDonough (1997) explains how values affect college choice, "every student filters her college options through the lenses of her academic achievement, her economic circumstances, her field of vision, and her values" (151). The values within families lead to a sense of entitlement (or lack of entitlement) and this environment influences what students perceive as their choices. That high-achieving students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds tend not to apply to elite institutions (Alvarado & López Turley 2012; Black, Cortes, & Lincove 2015; Fryar & Hawes 2012; Hoxby & Avery 2013), speaks directly to this notion and the potency of dominant narratives. Indeed, Serna (2015) states that within certain social categories, a student's choices, not just around college but on the whole, are decidedly limited by these factors. So powerful are these components of social life that they are highly predictive of an individual's economic well-being.

In this context, policy, practice, and research can intersect to challenge outdated ideals of entitlement, stratification, and values. Through a continued reliance upon metrics that are more closely aligned to dominant social class, socio-economic status, and race, higher education reinforces the values mentioned here. In the development of policy and day-to-day practice, tacit values are held and reproduced. In this realm, research and its accompanying theory is a powerful tool for combating these norms, while influencing policy formulation and implementation as well as the practical components of quotidian tasks that support these structures.

## **Expectations**

Tinto (1975) suggests generational mobility "may be built upon the passing on of family expectations to their children" (100). As it stands, the education system fails low-income students in this regard. The setting of expectations for college access and success, and for setting their sights on elite colleges is severely limited for those from the non-dominant population when certain expectations are normalized. Meraji (2015) writes about the work of economist Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University and her research on "undermatching." Meraji (2015) shares the story of Kristen Hannah Perez, a high school graduate in a small town outside of Dallas. Ms. Perez has a high SAT score, completed several AP courses, and has the extra-curricular resume of a top student in any urban high school. But, when asked about college choice, she and her family never even considered a top-tier school; elite colleges are "out of our league, out of our range" (Meraji 2015, 4).



Multiple studies confirm the impact of expectations, indicating what Paulsen and St. John (2002) call a “disturbing manifestation of class reproduction” (227).

A lack of entitlement, which is related to elitism, may stem from America’s deeply entrenched meritocratic values (Karabel & Astin 1975). An elitist mentality among some individuals suggests the greatest resources should go to the brightest students, undeniably the bedrock of the American dream. A problematic situation arises however, when the realities of social reproduction and merit/elitism clash. In this context, students from non-dominant groups, categories, or backgrounds are consistently told that their values do not match the dominant narrative. In fact, even high-achieving students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds temper their college choices to “safety” schools. Because measures of merit are so closely tied to dominant narratives and values, this often leads non-dominant students to have feelings of unworthiness and low expectations. Unfortunately, “undermatching represents a real loss of opportunity to students and a major loss of talent for the nation” (Byndloss et al. 2015, 6). This quote precisely, and unambiguously, relates the notion of social reproduction and college access to practice and policies that inhibit certain groups from obtaining a college education. It also clearly ties together these aspects to frame them in terms of losses to society and the public good.

Finally, under these same influences, higher education institutions actively send messages regarding values and expectations. The discourse surrounding college going and access is decidedly related to this “relay” of information where institutions reproduce social messages. Higher education institutions are not only part of the social milieu, passively setting expectations; they are now actively marketing to influence student’s college choices (Rhoades 2014). This is not necessarily problematic in itself as it provides useful information. However, it is problematic when the information that is shared implicitly devalues certain types of capital and holds up as exemplary the social categories and language of the dominant group to the detriment of non-dominant populations.

### **High-Stakes Testing**

A review of the literature on college access and choice would not be complete without a look at the role of high-stakes testing. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) invest an entire section of their book to studying the role of the examination. Subsequently, Au (2008) shows that high-stakes testing is clearly related to social reproduction. The findings indicate that these assessments reproduce race- and class-based inequalities. As noted by Au (2008), these tests “operate as a relay in the reproduction of dominant social relations” (639). The tests themselves do not cause social reproduction, but they work as a relay through legitimizing the knowledge, values, and language of the dominant class (Au 2008). In other words, what are often considered to be objective and widely available measures of student ability, serve as a primary and forceful mechanism for retaining and reinforcing the values, attitudes, language, and capital of the dominant group. For example, in a study examining 17 states that had implemented high-stakes testing, Amrein and Berliner (2002) report that these types of examinations negatively affect students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds disproportionately, and typically decrease their attainment rates. This brings the discussion once again to the role of policy and practice.

Thomas et al.’s (1979) early findings align with Amrien and Berliner (2002) and Serna (2015), in suggesting, that the current college admission practice and selection system based on test scores “perpetuates social class and race differences in college attendance” (153). One is also

pressed to ask why such loyalty to these inaccurate and flawed metrics for measuring student ability has maintained such staying power. To be sure, these measures provide a relatively cost-effective and simple process for sorting or screening students. However, it is difficult to see true believers of the American dream disagree with the sentiment that social class, socioeconomic status, or race should determine an individual's success, especially when that person is highly productive. The problem, nonetheless, is that for most students, background is, for better or for worse, highly predictive of future life outcomes—not ability.

Another concern arises around the discourse in higher education where this system and its accompanying reliance upon traditional measures of merit, has only marginally changed access and participation of those from non-white, non-wealthy backgrounds. Of primary concern is the battle to create an education system that values the cultural, linguistic, and economic capital of those from these backgrounds. Surely a positive move in increasing access and valuing non-dominant narratives and capital starts with day-to-day practice. This is further supported and is often enshrined in policy actions enhanced by research employing and taking up a critical stance. Without all of these parts working in tandem, it is unlikely that access to higher education will change in a substantive way.

To avoid some of the difficulties that arise with examinations, another form of pedagogy that may be well suited to a wide range of individuals is the use of competency-based learning practices. In a competency-based learning model, students work to master specific competencies using a variety of learning models that include direct experience, research, and information from experts. Students move through a series of competencies at their own speed. Competency-based learning is a radical shift in education and represents a threat to traditional postsecondary institutions (Voorhees 2001), as has been seen in popular higher education trade publications recently. Within a competency-based education system, we remove the barriers of high-stakes testing and grades. Because these structures have long been relied on in traditional schooling, faculty and administrators typically resist the notion of competency-based learning.

### **Social and Economic Costs**

On the economic spectrum, higher education is considered a quasi-public good. This position suggests that higher education as a whole exhibits characteristics that provide benefit both to society and to the individual.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, there are both personal and social costs associated with a continued and systemic attainment gap. When examined from a private good perspective, there are high associated direct and indirect economic costs of not going to college. Perna (2006) suggests the average lifetime earnings of individuals with bachelor's degrees is 73 times higher than individuals with a high school diploma. Additionally, Baum (2001) so aptly states, "the cost of not going to college has skyrocketed" (47). A college degree is one of the surest paths to the middle class. Bourdieu's SRT supports this view: schooling perpetuates the social structures, narratives, and linguistics of the dominant class. To reach material success, one must use the cultural means at one's disposal. In the case of America, that path is higher education. This is not to suggest that simply accessing higher education is in itself a panacea. Still, by understanding and employing the mechanisms that serve certain populations so well, those from non-dominant backgrounds can access structures that are so clearly in need of change and re-envisioning. In terms of economic outcomes, Vernez, Krop and Rydell (1999) reinforce the idea that higher education should be the great equalizer. They demonstrate that the economic gap, between those who complete college and

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1. For an excellent discussion of this as applied to higher education see Paulsen (2001b).

those who do not, is widening. Several reports (Schneider and Yin 2011; Vernez, Krop, & Rydell 1999; Ladson-Billings 2006) illustrate the difference in earnings between individuals who earn a college degree and those who do not. With this in mind, one could argue that at least two things are occurring from a social reproduction perspective. First, individuals who do not attend college are marginalized in such an effective fashion that their social and cultural capital is easily dismissed. In other words, class stratification is easily maintained and reproduced. This oppression, in turn, stifles economic and social growth, not just for the individual but for society as well. The benefits that would accrue to the individual and society, which in aggregate are significant, are greatly diminished.

Continuing along this line of thinking, college attainment as a public good, means that the increased wages individuals earn by completing a college degree also significantly contribute to the tax base throughout their lives not to mention the empowerment it engenders when they maintain close connections to their local communities. Using IPEDS and wage data, Schneider and Yin (2011) estimate the loss in state and federal income taxes for those students who start college, but then drop out. Analyzing the 2010 cohort of students and basing data on federal and state tax rates, they estimate that \$566 million were lost in federal taxes and \$164 million lost in state taxes for a single year. In an earlier study, Vernez et al. (1999) concur and determined “the largest relative increase in public revenues occurs between those with some college and college graduates” (30).

There are additional economic advantages when students complete college. Vernez et al. (1999) have shown a significant decline in the need for welfare and the cost of incarceration when larger proportions of the population have a college degree. This study indicates that the investment in welfare per person decreases significantly as educational attainment increases; essentially a positive externality, not captured in individual earnings, from enhancing college access. Looking at these costs through Bourdieu’s social reproduction lens, a similar theme emerges with a very similar question: what are the costs for continuing to serve, not only but primarily, the dominant class and neglecting others? Given the evidence regarding the economic incentives this would create, not enabling more students to access college seems counterproductive. For example, Vernez et al.’s (1999) study determined that for every \$1 spent on providing a college degree, personal and public benefit amounts to \$4.90. These multiplier effects of higher education spending account for the benefits accrued by savings on welfare and corrections, as well as higher wages and income tax revenue.

Still, even with these positive economic indicators, Sullivan et al. (2015) uncovered some startling findings. Their study shows that, even with a college degree, the return on investment is significantly lower for Black and Hispanic students. This is likely due to several factors, including their need to take on greater debt, and their lower level of cultural capital in the job market, education system, and on campuses; the median return for Black and Latina/o families attain from a college degree is \$4,846 and \$4,191 respectively. These values are compared to a return of \$55,869 in wealth that a white family receives from a college degree. Sullivan et al. (2015) note:

Students of color often confront unsustainable expenses as they pursue higher education, leading to huge debt burdens and lower graduation rates. Black and Latina/o students, with less family wealth than white students are more likely to struggle with higher costs, seek out less expensive schools, work excessive hours, reduce study time to work, and/or take on more student debt. (18)

There is a great irony in this story: education is the path to improved social status and mobility, but it really only works for those families and individuals who are already part of the dominant group structure in some way. Hence, that America is witnessing a widening wealth gap that closely correlates with a person's race and social class is not necessarily surprising. The personal costs for those individuals at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder, with lower levels of social and cultural capital, are significant. Not only do they live in poverty, there is little hope for them to escape when the social system is so clearly aligned to support only certain types of cultural capital and higher education is no exception. It also explains why Perna (2006) finds that financial policies and practices related to the affordability of college "seem to be working in contradiction to intentions to close gaps in college access" (104) and which likely have resulted in less inclusivity across higher education if not other civic and societal institutions.

To be sure, the costs of not supporting college access for all individuals go beyond the economic costs. Wolfe and Haveman (2001) share the following non-financial, and conceivably social marginalization, impacts when there are disparities in educational outcomes:

- Children of less educated individuals are more likely to be less educated
- Health status is lower
- Consumer choices are less efficient
- Fertility choices are less than ideal (e.g. decisions by teenagers and nonmarital childbearing)
- Likelihood for criminal activities increases (2-3)

In addition to these personal costs, there is evidence to indicate that low-income communities are more likely to be excluded from the civic process (Ladson-Billings 2006). Blacks and Hispanics are minimally represented in the legislature, and their voter registration numbers indicate a significant gap in that arena as well.

While we have focused heavily upon the economic costs to individuals and society these are not the only concerns. In terms of social costs not measured simply in economic terms, a reality is that systemic marginalization is in itself an ill. The devaluation, exclusion, or in fact a focus primarily on the economic value of individuals and groups, removes from them an essential part of their humanity—their rights as humans. As Sen (1999) notes, individuals, groups, and societies all deserve access to quality education, healthcare, housing etc., not because they are part of an economic engine but because they are, simply put, humans. The relationships between social capital, SRT, and academic and economic success are a "messy reality" (Field 2005, 78). The tension between educational structures that inhibit and those that support equity is palatable. On one hand we have the clear disenfranchisement of Black and Hispanic students struggling in a higher education environment of 20<sup>th</sup> century American values; and on the other hand, the opportunity to diminish disparities through renewed support of these students. The ideas noted here arguably capture some of the power behind challenging dominant structures and social reproduction by providing a basis for enhancement of social cohesion, inclusion, and prosperity. In this way, higher education provides a fruitful structure for this to occur. However, this requires that dominant narratives are challenged, non-dominant capital valued, and discourse and policy restructured so that college access is only a step in the path to a more democratic, inclusive society for all.

## Conclusion

Through a powerful focus on dominant values a system of higher education designed by and for this group, of primarily white, wealthy individuals has been created and sustained. For the last several decades, policymakers, scholars, and practitioners have been trying to determine the best ways in which to fix the problems of income inequality, educational equity, and social inclusiveness and cohesion by force fitting all individuals into the same mold without deconstructing the values underpinning the design and use of this mold. To be clear, the research evidence shows that it is a mold that works well for the dominant group, but works less well for others.

As higher education moves forward, it is important to look outside traditional methods of education and schooling and attempts at inclusive practice and policy. To address a diverse population, there must be diverse opportunities for learning and diverse measures of merit. With this comes an opportunity to explore how education is funded, understood, discussed, and provided. As noted throughout this review, Bourdieu centers his theory on schools because “schooling” is symbolic for the transmission of wealthy, white American values. “The academically and socioeconomically ‘rich’ become richer (i.e., attend schools having superior intellectual and material resources) while the academically and socioeconomically ‘poor’ become poorer” (Hearn 1984, 28). As we move toward addressing the attainment gap, finding a means to address the social and cultural gaps within higher education is equally important as is the notion of a more democratic, inclusive, and equitable society. In considering the interlocking roles played by policy, research, and practice, it is imperative that we not only address college access and choice, but also ensure that concerns around stratification in higher education come to occupy a central position in this discourse.

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